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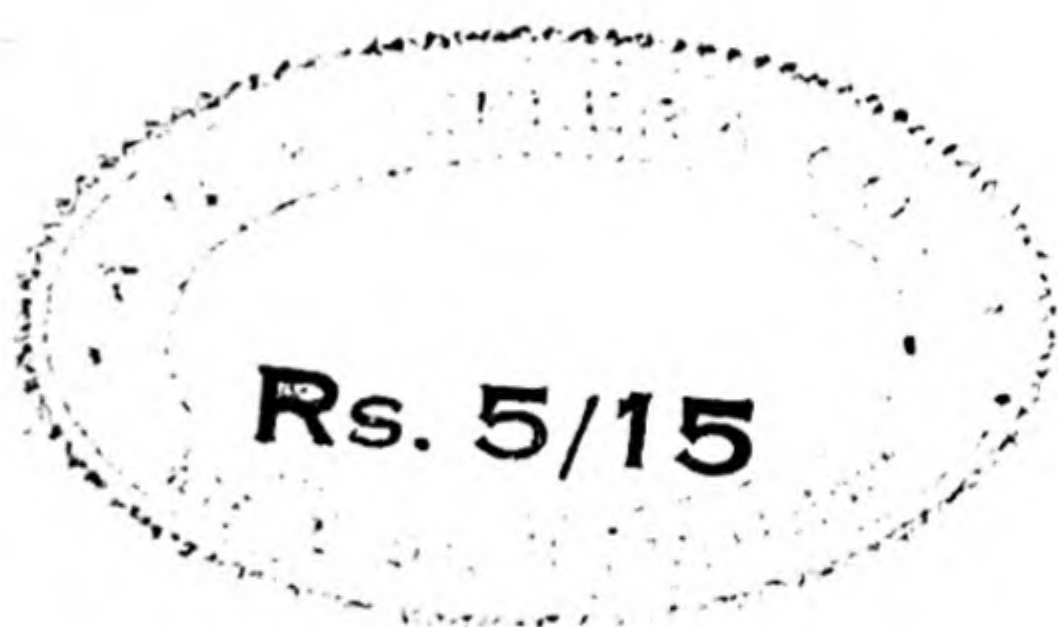
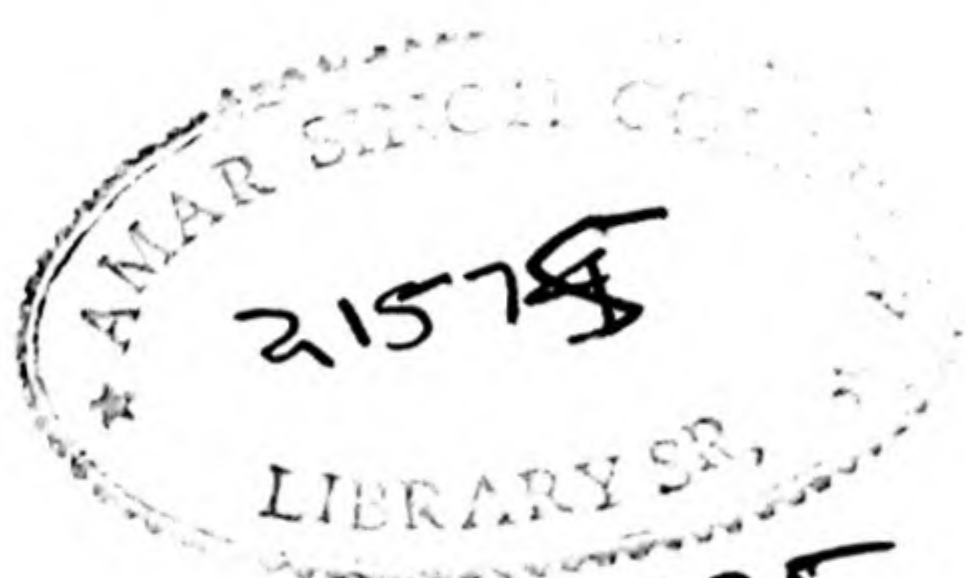
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THE PAYING GUEST

By
GEORGE BLAKE



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CHAPTER ONE

FIVE IN THE FAMILY

I

RAISING his eyes from the litter of papers on the table before him, in order thus to chase with greater freedom the phantom form of one of these permutations he found it so difficult to pin down, Olly Pomphrey rested them on the figure of his old friend and hostess, Ness Nimmo.

She sat at her sewing-machine in the bow of the attic window, her feet busy on the treadle, her eyes and fingers combining in an apparently agonised effort to make a perfectly straight hem in the pink material under the stabbing needle. Olly was aware that Ness was, against time, running up a party frock for little Peggy Buchan in the flat below. A great worker, old Ness ; nothing too much trouble for her ; always ready to oblige. Marvellous woman.

With an unwonted intimacy of interest, Mr. Pomphrey allowed himself to consider the physical nature of this woman so near him in present fact and in constant relationship.

She was a big lump of a girl—as he liked to phrase it to himself—no doubt about that, and perhaps putting it on a bit as she approached middle age. What would she be, now ? Thirty . . . Thirty . . . at least thirty-eight ; if he could only remember exactly when her old father had died. Say, thirty-eight, and never mind a few months here or there. But she wore dashed well, thought Olly. Handsome—that was the word for it. Some of these women of half-Italian blood were bags of lard before they were out of their twenties, but Ness had height on her side. Her rather pale face was out of the Roman mould ; against the late sunlight of the April afternoon Olly enjoyed the numismatic clarity of her profile and the rapt and undulant lower of her eyebrows. She was by no means what a chap would call a nice little bit of fluff, but Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo was a dashed fine woman just the same, whatever they might say.

Mr. Peter Oliphant Pomphrey—P. Oliphant Pomphrey in his dreams of grandeur, “Pop” to the sardonic jesters of his native town—had a mind as tidy, limited, respectable and shallow as a kitchen garden. No gust of passion, not even the bite of a proper scientific curiosity, had informed his momentary study of Ness Nimmo. It had all been in the passing, as so much of his awareness of life always was. Having roughly classified his companion in the upper room, Olly returned to his forms, his troublesome permutations and, in particular, the chances of Tranmere Rovers against Lincoln City in Division III (North) of the English League. His mild mind was unvisited by any curiosity as to the provenance of the Rovers or the whereabouts of Tranmere. Such considerations were but ciphers in his calculations towards the vast wealth and power he dreamed of possessing.

He went on marking his 1's, 2's and X's in the tiny squares of his forms, using for this purpose a mapping pen of exquisite fineness, for he greatly feared disputes and ambiguities where large sums of money might be involved. His penmanship was naturally beautiful: one of the few things in his life with which he had taken the special and typically timid care of the thwarted. He became so rapt in his strange pursuit that he did not notice the easing and cessation of the sewing-machine's whirring nor the cautious movement of a woman's head to watch his doings and consider his person in her turn.

There he was, reflected Ness tolerantly, playing away with his silly old Pools. It was the same every Wednesday afternoon. You would think a middle-aged man might have something better to do. Ness, however, had many years ago ceased to waste serious thought over the inveterate habits of Olly. He was happy in his absorption, and she smiled tolerantly to think how well she understood towards what ideals he directed his pseudo-scientific quest for money and the power it would give him. Anyhow, she had never known him lose on his wagers over any season since he had taken the fancy. Cheques and postal orders would arrive every two months or so, and Olly was able to show her on paper (if she had been interested to follow his cipherings) that what he called the Family Float was always in funds. Goodness knew that the weekly investment was a trifle! If it gave him something to do, Ness was

content. Neither the wisdom nor the morality of his hazard concerned her in the least. She was merely amused by his insistence on calling it an "investment."

Yes, poor Olly was sweet, in young Kit's schoolgirl phrase. He brought such a polished gravity of mind and such an elegance of person to the little affairs of his little, feckless, genteel and harmless life. Even the impatient flick of his forefinger at the military moustache as he puzzled over a nice point of form charmingly parodied the mannerism of a true man of affairs. His neat brown suit, the foulard tie caught within a thick gold band below the old-fashioned choker collar, the sheen on his fine tan shoes—and these he would not suffer any woman to touch—seemed to impart an antique air, a whiff of Edwardian formality, into this attic room of a tenement building in which he laboured to rediscover fortune through the Pools in the company of a middle-ageing sempstress : she, not the landlady but the hostess ; he, never the lodger but the paying guest. The understanding was at the basis of their undeclared but substantial friendship.

Ness turned over the length of pink material, now fashioned into something like a party frock for a little girl, and her dark eyes scanned it for imperfections of workmanship and stray ends of thread. It would do. It was another job done, a few more shillings earned. She started to fold it, reflecting that she must shortly go down to the kitchen and start preparing the evening meal.

A weary sense of boredom overcame her. As she grew older, ever older, more and more frequently was she possessed by this feeling of monotony and unrewarded labour in a woman's life. Cleaning, sewing, cooking ; trying to do two things at once ; making the fires and washing up the greasy dishes ; often under criticism for her cooking and catering, especially from Quintin, with an occasional, warming word of compliment from Olly. Sometimes, to get it, she would quite out of turn make the Spanish omelette he adored and Quintin loathed.

Anything for variety ; it had been going on for so many years now ; it would go on going on so far as she could envisage the likely course of her earthly pilgrimage. Young Kit was a help about the house, but she had the adolescent trick of

breaking things and putting the dishes and the cutlery back in the wrong places, just doubling the work really, and Ness had plans to make sure that Kit would never fall into the rut.

She put her elbow on the sewing-machine table and rested her cheek on the hand thus indolently supported. Lord, there was surely time in life for a quiet moment of reverie, for a moment belonging absolutely to oneself!

Her dark eyes contemplated the sea. The attic window stood high, like a lighthouse lantern, above the Marine Station. Three miles of deep-water anchorage and shallows stretched towards the northern shore. It seemed that evening as if the setting sun was propelling puffs of golden light to fill the spaces between the cold north wall of her tenement building and those fabulous slopes on the other side of the water. The rolls or waves of deep yellow light had the palpability of clouds as they came up from the Firth on a light wind that fretted the smoothness of the inland sea in patches. They engulfed the blue slate roofs and white walls of the houses over there on the other side of the water, giving the distant dwellings the quality of buildings read about in a fairy story or seen in a guide-book to Sweden or one of those foreign places.

The day-dream had been Ness's companion for many years, but it never lost its slow, sad sweetness. She shared the common illusion of those who looked northwards across the Deeps that the little town on the other side of the water, with its southern aspect, enjoyed many more enchanted hours of warm sunlight than her native Garvel on its steep foothills. She invested the place over there with a romantic and alien quality; she thought of its people as gay, leisured and free from want. Her envy of their villas and gardens was as passionate as it was hopeless, springing from her profound and controlled but still agonised desire to escape from the top flat of the tenement building to which she was confined by the tyranny of circumstance.

As she watched the sunlight gleam on the pale walls of a Georgian house on that distant shore, the corner of her eye was taken by a sudden flash of blinding white in the water to the left of her view. It was little more than a point of cold fire near the tide-tilted buoy over the Ardhallow Patch, and then, as it moved, it threw off like a comet the sparks of evening

light reflected from glass and polished brass. A motor yacht, the first of the season surely, had come out of the Norloch from Goldie's Yard, its owner bent on exploiting a late, fine Easter. Seeing the beautiful little ship, Ness Nimmo smiled.

It reminded her of Dad, and when she thought of Dad his oldest daughter had to smile. She was never sad or sentimental about the dear departed. Dad had been the best and healthiest of jokes all his long days.

David he had been christened ; David Nimmo, for many a year foreman shipwright with Tod & Bannerman ; Wee Davie to the bosses and his workmates alike ; and to all the town, in its jocular moments, Captain Slocum. He was such a ruefully merry little man, so comically foundered in life amid his several and conflicting interests, so humorously candid about his failure to integrate all the velleities of an eager personality !

It was the exasperating thing about life, thought Ness, that even the kindest and simplest must be somehow frustrated. Considering the hills on the other side of the water, she wondered if true happiness was an attainable human end, for she had come on no proof of the fact in the world she knew. The rationality of her half-Latin mind could not compass the notion of saintliness and purification by self-abnegation ; and while the circumstances of her own life had compelled her to believe greatly in the power of wealth to buy distraction and buy off inconvenience, her sense told her that all the money in the world could not avert the attack of diphtheria on a beloved child or the defection of a sweetheart. No, she said to herself, I am guilty of sentimentality in allowing myself to think that Wee Davie Nimmo was frustrated. How else indeed can I smile so happily at the memory of him ?

It was wiser to see that he had been a man of divided allegiances, of conflicting enthusiasms. Perhaps his handicap had been that he played the fiddle so well, so that he was swept up into marriage with Carlotta Godenzi, the statuesque and ambitious daughter of fat Toni Godenzi, the Tally, as they called him in Garvel's common speech : Italian confectioner and ice-cream merchant in the local Directory.

Those Scoto-Italians, to whom she belonged whether she liked it or not, had the Jewish trick of exploiting the simple,

careless Northern folk. They looked after the pennies and banked them in Italy ; and Ness smiled again to think that she had scores of cousins and half-cousins who, the big men of mountainy villages in Latium and the Abruzzi, spoke among themselves in the rough lingo of the Scottish Lowlands as they wolfed their spaghetti, sucked their olives and gulped their rough native wines. She always thought of her father as a little plain man caught up in a sort of alien plot to make money. He was a brilliant player of dance measures on the fiddle and the Godenzis had therefore marked him down as the profitable mate of Carlotta, Signoretta Carlotta Godenzi, the Dancing Mistress, with a series of graduated classes for all ages and conditions in the Temperance Hall, four sessions weekly.

Ness saw the dear wee man on an elevated chair in a corner of the hall, sawing away with precision and spirit as his stately wife, now Signora, dictated the measures with waves of her plump, suety hands and sharp phrases in Italo-Scots. He was somehow like a keen little terrier with ginger hair and fresh complexion, put to an unwholesome job but determined to make the best of it for loyalty's sake.

Ness was sometimes unhappy to think that her father had thus been humiliated, but she could not in honest recollection believe that he had ever been consciously unhappy. He had had the gift of living in the moment ; give him a fiddle or a plane, a bow or a saw, and either implement was to him of an interest as urgent as a fine square of soft chamois to a proud housewife. It was something that the Signora's dancing classes had had to be timed to equate with his working hours : three evenings a week and Saturday afternoons.

What her mother had never known, reflected Ness as she watched the white yacht pass out of sight down the Firth towards Hamilton's Quay, was that the little fiddler, her orchestra by marriage, had found his essential poetry in realms far removed from the sweaty atmosphere and powdered floor of the Temperance Hall. Probably only she, Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo, his firstborn, knew that the great love which clawed at Wee Davie's heart of a craftsman was that a man may strangely bear towards ships and boats.

Now she realised that he had confided to her, both as

small child and mature woman, his true delight. It was sweetly amusing to remember how he would nurse her to sleep with his promise to build "a bonnie wee boat for a bonnie wee lass," a phrase that had for her the lilt of a folk song ; it was sweetly sad to recall how, in his dotage, he would prattle endlessly of the great yachts that had raced on the Firth and how, returning to his girl's childhood in his own last infantilism, he would promise to build that bonnie wee boat for a bonnie wee lass ; and she a large, mature woman and he a pantaloon frustrated !

There would be no bonnie wee boats for Miss Nimmo the sempstress. The very circumstances that had inspired Wee Davie's dream and made him a great talker about the lone feats of his hero, Captain Slocum, bound her now to the Singer sewing-machine and the care of a household of young folk and a lodger, even if the mutual humiliation had to make him the paying guest. With complete coolness, without malice or envy, she had long ago accepted her destiny—spinster, virgin, needlewoman, domestic worker for her brothers and sisters, fighting for years along an extended front to keep up appearances and bring up the offspring of the Signora and Captain Slocum in indigent respectability but with, for them, the younger ones, the hope of advancement.

The white motor yacht had passed completely out of her sight while these reflections coursed swiftly through her mind. Her desires were following it, however, and suddenly she realised that she was falling into sick, tired envy of the rich people who could possess so much beauty and on a whim sail away from cares. Envy and self-pity were for Ness Nimmo the enemies, infiltrating into her lone positions. She rose abruptly from her chair, saying :

" Well, I suppose you will all want some sort of supper."

Mr. Pomphrey rose with her in his unvarying regard for the courtesies and said, with a bob :

" No hurry so far as I am concerned, Miss Nimmo. You do too much, and I haven't heard Quintin come in. There's plenty here," he indicated the litter of forms before him, " to keep me busy for quite a while."

" That's wasting time surely, Mr. Pomphrey ? " she laughed kindly.

"Oh no ! It's a gamble, if you like, but it's a hobby quite as respectable as chess or bridge. The fun of playing with all the possible variations—you've no idea ! And I'm dashed if I see," added Olly, making a brisk pass at his moustache with a nicotine-stained forefinger, "why a fellow shouldn't have a cut at the cash these Pools chappies are handing out. We could all do with a slice of it, couldn't we ?"

"We could. But we all need to be fed in the meantime. I'm afraid it's only kippers to-night, Mr. Pomphrey."

"Delightful ! You can say what you like, but a good kippered herring makes a jolly good meal."

He bowed her out and, resuming his seat at the table, picked up the mapping pen. Ness went down the narrow stair from the attic to the kitchen on the main flat, passing obediently from the service of the sewing-machine to that of the gas stove.

Kit sat at the deal table, her school-books about her. What a pity the child had to wear specs and use her eyes so closely on German script and the barren formulæ of Algebra ! Quite nice-looking, too, if without the dazzle of Bambi, that wild and lovely girl away across the seas with her American sailor husband ; and a good thing his ship had come back to the Firth in time or she, Ness Nimmo, might have had a parcel of soiled goods on her hands over and above what they bore already.

"Better get the table laid," she said to the young girl automatically.

"Just a sec till I finish this theorem."

In a shabby basket chair before the fire lounged Duggie, dark and strong and mysterious. He was strumming on his banjulele, and it was strange enough for Ness to see, for all his burliness, how much of the Italian was in him. Like a bandit chief in an opera, but lazier and more remote ; oh, how remote since he had come back from the wars, a sergeant of Marine Commandos out of a job and now, seemingly, without interest to find one ! Ness could not help chiding him in the housewifely way.

"Dug, I think you might find something better to do than strum away on that silly thing and keep Kit off her work."

"He doesn't keep me off my work. I like it."

The girl spoke insolently, but there it was. She would at any moment rush like a broody hen to the defence of the dark brother with whom she had an affinity Ness could not analyse and hardly even understand. Duggie rose slowly from the basket chair, smiling slowly.

"What's the job, Ness? Leave it to me. I'm a better cook than you'll ever be."

"It's just kippers. But you can cut some bread and make toast till Quin comes in. I'll lay the table myself."

As she spread the white cloth in the room next door and fished for the cutlery in the top drawer of the sideboard, she could hear Duggie preparing to cook. He was a wonder at it for a man, but like all men he had to make an awful lot of noise and fuss. She had been wondering lately if Dug wouldn't think of going in for it, training as a chef . . .

"And where the bloody hell," Ness heard him address young Kit, "does Ness keep the cooking fat?"

"You don't need cooking fat for kippers," the girl replied.

"I do. If you imagine, kid, that chunks of burned guano hanging to bits of bone is a kipper, you've a lot to learn. Oh, blast and damn!"

Kit laughed loudly, and no other person in the household could make her laugh with that comradely abandon. Duggie had burned a finger on the stove and was making the most of it for Kit's delight. But it was really awful that he should use such language before a young girl.

"Quintin's late," Kit was saying next.

"The Solicitor-General?" Dug responded. "You don't seem to realise, kid, that Quintin is a Big Shot. Bet you a bob he'll come in looking as if he had just arranged the fall of the Government. But he's probably seeing one of his touts who happened to be on the spot when an old lady was run over in the Rue End this afternoon."

Ness paused in the laying of her table as she heard these words. She might have used them herself in an extreme of bitterness. It was more terrible that they should be the light, unweighted arrows of persiflage between Quin's younger brother and youngest sister. She stood by the sideboard with her mother's old fish-slice in her hand, chilled by unhappiness. Quintin was a handful, if ever there was one, but to know that

his angularities were, like a frost, to crack the cement of the decent family life in open dislike within this other secret coalition . . . Ness wondered if these young people would never see how long and difficult was the battle she had to wage for mere decency among them all.

Quick footsteps on the landing and the turn of his key in the lock intimated Quintin's return from the office. Ness stepped out into the dim lobby to greet him.

"That you, Quintin?"

"It looks rather like it, doesn't it?"

He hung his raincoat and hat on the stand, brushed past her and slammed the door behind him.

Her brother, she thought, the second child of David Nimmo and Carlotta Godenzi, was the most unpleasant person she had ever known. He had studied rudeness all his life and become a ruthless master in that art. If he had been stupid, you could have battled with him. His strength, among his own folk at least, was in his cleverness, his forensic resource. Ness knew that she was a fool to put up with it; she wished she had either Olly's serene superiority to Quin's crudeness or the ragging hostility Dug and Kit could bring to their dealings with their brother. She was just the usual fool of an older sister, however, hoping that tolerance and restraint would one day be rewarded: the woman fated to be a professional keeper of the peace in the household she had inherited. She often reflected that too many women wear themselves out untimely in the struggle to make peace among turbulent males and the reckless young.

Ness was with Dug and Kit in the kitchen when Quintin came among them again, his rimless eyeglasses shining, his thin, twitching, pink nose in the air.

"Are we not ready?" he asked. "And, oh lord! Kippers again."

"Sorry, m'Lud," said Duggie, turning from the pan with a grin on his heavy, dark face that spoke of a willingness for physical battle. "There wasn't any Royal Sturgeon to-day."

"That is supposed to be humorous, I suppose," said Quintin.

"Oh, chuck it, Quin!" Kit piped up. "You'd think you owned the place."

"I contribute more to its upkeep than you and your beloved brother will ever do."

"That's enough!" said Ness sharply. "Three of you together, and we have nothing but quarrelling. I think we might have a little peace."

"That is precisely what I ask for."

"What you are asking for," said Dug with another of his dangerous grins, "is one good swipe across the kisser with this dried herring."

"This is civilisation, hard as it may be for you to appreciate the fact. We are not interested in Commando raids nowadays."

"You took jolly good care never to get mixed up in one." Kit shot the accusation at her elder brother.

"When a glimmering of understanding penetrates the forest of your mind, Kit; when your vestigial intelligence starts to work . . ."

Ness stamped her foot on the linoleum.

"Stop it!" she cried peremptorily. "I'm sick of this eternal squabbling. Mr. Pomphrey will be down immediately. Are those kippers ready, Dug?"

"To a turn, Ness. Bring down the paying guest."

Kit went out to call upstairs, as a farm wench might call the cattle home at a stated hour each evening: "Mr. Pomphrey! Mr. Pomphrey! Supper's ready." Her chant had actually something of the ritual, musical rhythm of a bidding to animals.

"Thank you, Kit! Just coming," came the faint and courteous reply from the attic.

Olly Pomphrey bowed formally as he came among the Nimmos in the dining-room. He placed a stamped envelope on the mantelpiece, propped against the marble timepiece so that it could hardly be overlooked. He bobbed again to Ness as he took his seat at the table on her right next to young Kit, and he smiled towards Quintin opposite.

"Home again, Quintin? Busy day in the office?"

His tone was marvellously that of one who, in his time, has borne the heat and burden of the day. Though his questions were the slightest of diurnal formulæ, Quintin replied quite without any of the snappiness he reserved for his own people:

with, indeed, a certain warmth, as of understanding between men of affairs and manners.

"Very busy," he said. "Of course, we're up to the ears in this Harbour Trust case."

"Yes," observed Olly gravely. "Ticklish business that. The harbours have been the curse of this town ever since I can remember. . . . I say, these are jolly good kippers !"

"Not bad at all," Quintin allowed.

"You didn't say that when Dug was cooking them," Kit piped up with the awful realism of the adolescent.

"I didn't happen to be addressing myself to you at the moment," said Quintin.

"That'll do." Ness was sharp again in her unhappiness.

"And by the way, Duggie," Mr. Pomphrey changed the subject with the smoothness of custom, "do you think East Fife can pull it off against Alloa on Saturday? Dashed if I could make up my mind how to mark it! Of course, I've covered everything in my permutations; at least, I *think* I have."

"Still dreaming of a white Christmas?" asked Duggie with his lazy, strong laugh.

"There's nothing funny about it," snapped Quintin. "It's a lottery, pure and simple, but when hundreds of thousands of pounds are going a-begging every week, and *no* Income Tax . . . I shouldn't mind having a few of them."

Quintin invariably supported Olly. He thought poorly of the paying guest as an intellect, but he admired and envied him for being what he believed himself to be by endowment, what he passionately wished to be in his own right—a gentleman. In some moods Quintin was quite sure of his own natural gentility; but in others he was not quite so sure, even if he was confident that he could eventually make the money he deemed necessary to establish and sustain the position.

"It all seems a bit silly to me," said Ness of gambling in general. "I just can't believe that anybody can get good money without working for it."

"You are distinctly dated, my dear Ness," said Quintin. "Your mind is the kind that was buried with Gladstone."

"Oh, I don't think there's much harm in a flutter!" Ness protested. "If I could win a hundred pounds on Saturday,

you wouldn't find me sending it back. But I still think people should work for their money. . . . Another cup of tea, Mr. Pomphrey ? ”

“ Thank you, Miss Nimmo. Nothing like a jolly good cup of tea.”

When she had served her guest and filled other cups handed to her from several points of the compass about her, knowing in each case exactly what quantities of sugar and milk to mix, Ness lit a cigarette, third of the five she allowed herself daily, and in the pleasant drowse of surcease the mild narcotic suggested, the men still talking of gambling's marvellous surprises (but as if these were within the control only of superior male intelligence), looked about her. The dark housewifely eye considered the incandescent mantles in the chandelier above the table ; no electricity in this tenement building, even in 1946. It brooded on fading curtains in crimson plush, on a stained carpet, fraying to the basic canvas near the door, on steel engravings and a heavy, ugly sideboard and a defective rocking-chair by the gas-fire, placed there to fill an emptiness and useless in any sitting-room.

This was her inheritance, bought cheap in her parents' early days together and now the emblems of her shabby gentility. Yes, she would know what to do with a hundred pounds or so out of the Pools !

In her sombre reverie, however, there was neither passion nor the glow of hope. Ness was excessively familiar with the inadequacy of her physical environment. She had long schooled herself in humility and patience and had resigned herself indeed, without rancour, to the function of carrying on from where her parents, by the incidence of death, had left off. Quintin could do well for himself, she was sure ; Kit was clever at her lessons. It was difficult to know about Duggie and the adorable Bambi, those baffling products of the Second German War. But that would all come right somehow, and she was herself a silly old fool to sit there, letting her mind lose grip on the practical things that were the props of her belief in being.

“ Well,” she announced suddenly, “ I suppose all you men are going out to-night as usual ? ”

This was her ritual grace after evening meat, and that was

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its only significance. She and Kit would be left to face the steamy odours of the kitchen sink, the grease on the plates, the kipper bones and the piles of dishes to dry. Duggie was always one to help during the day while other men worked, but the night after 7 p.m. was mysteriously his own, and Ness knew that she would not see him till he stumbled into her kitchen about ten next morning, asking with his strong charm, as of an Irish peasant, if he could have a cup of tea and any old bit of toast left over.

"Yes," said Olly politely, but as if his hostess had enunciated a completely new idea, "I think I will take a turn down to the Club."

2

Two fragments of innocent self-deception were embedded in Olly's announcement. No process of thought had led to his intention to visit the Club. The move was as blindly habitual as that of Ness to clear the table. If Mr. Pomphrey had intimated that he would not that evening visit the Club his hearers would have been stirred to wonder and curiosity, as if a cataclysm of nature portended. The ritual of life among the Nimmos assumed the paying guest's absence in the same place every evening except Sunday, which he invariably spent at the well-stocked table and in the comfortable rooms of his lifelong bachelor friend, Toddy Milne, in the whisky trade.

And to speak of "the Club" in that offhand, privileged tone was Olly's second white lie, poulticing a tender spot on the thin epidermis of his social consciousness.

Everybody in Garvel knew clearly the distinction between The Club and the National Unionist Club. Membership of The Club was, as it were, admission to an order of local knighthood, conferred only on members of the merchant families, on the few country gentlemen of the neighbourhood, on naval and military officers who might, to their surprise and faint disgust, find themselves on duty in West Scotland, and on men of affairs whose wealth and power were such that, whatever a chap might think of their origins and accents, could

not be blackballed without fear of consequences. The General Committee of The Club could never forget how, when old Sam Carruthers, the grain merchant, was denied admission to their sodality, he promptly paid through the nose to purchase the fine old house in Lorne Square their fathers had rented, and forced them to buy, at the cost of an urgent and exigent whip-round, the present house down the road in Gladstone Street. And the old swine had turned the Georgian house into a Maternity Home for Unmarried Mothers, if you please !

The National Club, on the other hand, though more consciously and aggressively active in the Conservative cause than The Club proper, was only "the Ragbag" of local persiflage. Anybody could get in, people said, and a great many rough parties did succeed in doing so. Shopkeepers of the more successful sort, lawyers and accountants on the lower levels of professional achievement, shipyard managers, small builders and plasterers, cinema managers—of such the membership largely consisted. A lot of very decent chaps among them, Olly could admit ; but to himself he confided with profound sorrow that they were no class at all.

His relegation to the National ; or the failure of his means and connections to qualify for The Club ; such was the central tragedy of Mr. Pomphrey's existence.

That was an empty and useless existence in many popular points of view, but it was his own and of vast and always exciting interest to himself. His consciousness of gentility had the force and honesty of a personal poetry. He believed in the validity of rank and manners as others do in the supremacy of brains or the dignity of labour. Without ever stopping to consider why he had become a person of reduced circumstances, paying guest in the tenement house of a sempstress and a member of only the National Unionist Club, he could not forget the great days when the house flag of Platt, Pomphrey's—the St. Andrew's Cross with a red thistle at the intersection of the diagonals—was to be seen on at least five of the Seven Seas, when he was a rich man's boy at Merchiston, when his father owned S.Y. *Octavia* and the 20-ton racing yacht *Melinda*, when, in fact, the twelve-roomed house of the Pomphreys in Garth Terrace was as a baronial castle, serviced and protected by ample means.

On this April evening of 1946 Peter Oliphant Pomphrey would have been vastly surprised and hurt to hear himself described, and with some accuracy, as a specimen of the middle class in decay. In his quite charming ignorance of the flow of political and economic influences during his adult life he was wholly satisfied that something had gone wrong somewhere ; that was his tolerant phrase for it. The advent to power of a Socialist Government was a national aberration, but a mistake that would be put right in good time, somehow. The dwindling of his inheritance in terms of both revenue and taxation was a more serious concern altogether, and it was damned hard for a chap to keep up appearances and still make ends meet. Much more important in his private mind than all that, however, was this stubborn fact that he, second son of Ebenezer Pomphrey of Platt, Pomphrey's, a Merchiston boy, a gentleman, was still not a member of The Club and obliged to find his relaxation in the National.

Ness, washing the last of the dishes while Kit at her elbow dried the crockery before facing the more irritating knives, forks and spoons, heard the front door close behind the paying guest and automatically envisaged the physical nature of his departure. It was silly, she knew, but every human movement up and down those tenement stairs—"the close," as they called it in the vernacular—had for her the character of an adventure in the morbid. She hated the tenement stairs ; hated their smell, their half-darkness, their association with old but unforgettable fear and unhappiness. And that always made her think cruelly of her mother ; and Ness did not wish to think unkindly of anybody who had ever lived in this difficult world.

She saw Olly on the top landing and thought to see the hungry eyes of one of the McJannet sisters peering through the letter-box in the door opposite. She could smell the mingled odours of cats, pipeclay and damp that must be in his nostrils as he made his way downwards ; two legs of stairs between each landing and each half-landing marked by a low, barred window with a vertiginous view of the pavement far below. She saw her guest pass under the cold light of an incandescent mantle within its municipal cage on each main landing. He would be hearing the brisk noises of children's fun and occa-

sional castigation from the Buchans' on the first floor left, matched by the roar of the loudspeaker from the poor old deaf Merriweathers' on the first floor right. Then he would be passing out on to the street along the lowest alley of all, and past that dark, blistered door behind which, long ago, she had lost all the lovely confidence of her young spirit.

Ness then smiled to picture Olly passing briskly down Stornoway Street into the Square. Her private humour, a secret asset, rejoiced in the knowledge that, some twenty years out of date, he would be wearing a brown bowler, a coat of blanket stuff cut short to the middle of his thighs, narrow stove-pipe trousers and tan boots. Such was Olly's considered conception of how a gentleman, a clubman, should face the world in the sartorial sense on a coldish spring evening. The poor, kind fellow did not seem to know that he was a sight, and that children called to each other to witness the eccentricity of his passings among them as they played under the dominant shadows of what they called "the lands"—the high tenement buildings that enclosed, conditioned and darkened their urban lives under the steep foothills and the rain they continually trapped.

Mr. Pomphrey, his malacca cane with its round silver knob swinging in first-class military fashion as he went along, passed across the corner of the Square towards the pillar-box under the high elms that, housing a colony of rooks in the very heart of the town, bordered the pleasant grounds of the Lorne Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club.

The gloaming was pervasive over the suburban streets; the rooks were raucously argumentative as they prepared to nest. Through the half-light Olly was seen by Sheena, the doctor's adolescent daughter in the corner house, to raise to his eyes the foolscap envelope in his right hand, study the address and the security of the flap, kiss it lightly and slip it into the care of His Majesty's mails. Sheena concluded that that funny Mr. Pomphrey, Ness Nimmo's lodger, had fallen in love, even at such an advanced age, and had written his sweetheart a long, long letter. She wondered wistfully, even with a pain of the lonely longing of youth, if and when she would receive a first love letter.

Having thus despatched his weekly offering to the Pools,

Mr. Pomphrey, his mind far from the amorous regions of human interest, walked about the Square along its southern and eastern sides. He could have proceeded northwards and eastwards with equal expedition, but his mild, persistent masochism must force him to pass the sandstone front of The Club. Articulate on a subject so near his heart, Olly might have declared that The Club didn't matter to him in any sense, not one single damn ; and why the devil shouldn't he walk past it when he pleased ? His private mind would have confessed that he always went that way about the Square in a complex of emotions, mild enough but persistently corrosive, ranging from hate to envy and from hope to a proud disdain.

As he passed The Club he saw out of the corner of his eye the broad, grudging, red face of Dan Dinwiddie looking out over one of the gauze screens that covered the lower halves of all the windows of the long smokeroom ; and a damned, ugly, arrogant face it was, thought Olly. The fellow had once been a clerk in Platt, Pomphrey's : a pound a week or something like that ; and then he had got into this hosiery business and married one of the Maclays of Cleveland. . . . No class at all ; and as for his accent and table manners ! But there he was, beefing it in a window of The Club, while one of the Pomphreys, —one of Garvel's splendid Oliphants, if it came to that—had to take the shady side of the street down to the National.

Such thoughts imparted to Mr. Pomphrey, by the blissful operation of the laws of compensation, a certain feeling of superiority towards The Club. In the National, at least, a chap knew where he was : no frills and no pretences. This emotion was encouraged in Olly by the alacrity of Sam the commissionaire to take his brown bowler, his blanket coat and stick and say that it was a pleasure to see you again, sir. The waiter in the smokeroom, Johnnie, was quite another kettle of fish. His duck jacket could have been cleaner—fellow would have been fired out of a good London club within five minutes—and a damned sight too familiar ; but Olly was gratified by the man's tallowy eagerness to show him to his favourite table in the corner by the fire.

“ And what will it be to-night, sir ? ” asked Johnnie.

“ The usual, please.”

"A wee whisky. And would you like a drop of ice in the water?"

"That will do nicely."

Olly wished those confounded Scots servants would learn to say "Sir." They wouldn't get away with that fresh sort of stuff in The Club, much less in The New in Edinburgh or at the Travellers or one of those places. Still, it was something to be a member of the General Committee, vice-chairman of the House Committee, and a Pomphrey with Oliphant connections.

He crossed the long room to collect the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Sphere*, the *Field* and *Men Only* from the table by the door. He had himself helped to frame the stringent rules which governed the use of periodicals within the club. There they were on the wall before him :

Periodicals must not be removed from this room on any account. Members may use only one at a time and must return it promptly to the table when finished with.

But it was Olly's innocence, rather than a vice of selfishness, which sustained him in a bland superiority to regulations framed for the discipline of fellows of no class at all.

As he read, a slow process, the room filled with men and smoke and babble, but Olly's privileged remoteness was undisturbed until Chris Howie, his bank manager and no respecter of Mr. Pomphrey's position, social or financial, hailed him briskly and slipped into a chair beside him.

"A drink, Pomphrey? Your glass is low."

"Very good of you, Howie, I'm sure. A small whisky, if you don't mind."

"Better order it before these soaks mop up the night's quota."

The party was enlarged in due course by the arrival of Theo Colville of the Paper Mill and, ten minutes later, Ben Kennedy, the art master at the Grammar School—as decent a set of chaps, Olly congratulated himself, as you could hope to muster in the National any night. It was a pleasing circumstance that this was Theo's wedding anniversary and the occasion, he insisted, for doubles all round.

"And what about a hand at Solo now?" Chris Howie suggested.

"Good idea," Olly agreed, "but can't we get a fifth man? It makes a better game."

"Go and bag a table in the cardroom," suggested Ben Kennedy, "and I'll rake up somebody."

Mr. Pomphrey, his thin fingers playing nimbly and affectionately with a new pack of cards, raised his eyebrows when he saw Ben come in with that fat little cad, Simons the grocer, behind him.

"That beastly outsider!" he muttered. "Looks damned like a Yid to me."

Chris Howie chuckled: "Cheer up, Pomphrey! He's got plenty of money to lose."

Mr. Pomphrey was the possessor of an exquisite card sense, that queer perversion of the mathematical genius so common among persons of otherwise uninteresting mind. He played always with his attention wholly on the game, careful and quiet and wary. At this session he rejected every offer of a proposition from Simons, who was a dolt in his estimation, and Ben Kennedy, who was reckless. On the other hand, he joined readily with Chris Howie, who knew the play almost as well as himself, and just a little less readily with Theo, who had the virtue of caution.

Five successful Solo efforts on his own part advanced Olly's fortunes as the time passed. He cunningly torpedoed a reckless Abundance by the little grocer fellow, who delightfully ordered another round of drinks by way of penance. As the session drew naturally to its close he considered a promising hand, weighed up the likely factor of error on the part of Simons to his immediate right, and announced that he would risk a Misere.

"Another of Pomphrey's ruddy miracles!" cried Chris Howie. "Look out, Simons."

"I'll double him," intimated the foolish grocer.

"I take that," said Olly gravely.

It was Simons' lead. He slapped down a small Club. Olly discarded an ace of Diamonds and threw the remainder of his hand on the baize.

"Rather too easy," he observed with a chill superiority.

He turned on Simons with a purist's indignation. "Why on earth not lead out of that long string of Diamonds in your hand and let the other chaps discard?"

He brushed up his moustache and rolled a cigarette of Norfolk Shag in a slip of rice paper. Chris Howie meanwhile pencilled industriously on the back of an envelope.

"You owe Pomphrey eighteen and a tanner, Simons," he intimated. "You, Ben, are down one and ninepence. . . ."

"I can stand my eighteen and a tanner and a bit more," declared the grocer with the truculence of those who know themselves to be vulnerable in social matters. "I tell you what, Pomphrey; I'll play you a hundred up for doubles or quits."

Olly considered the fellow's gross face with wonder and distaste. This was not only a damned cad, but also a damned fool.

"If you care to risk it," he agreed, flicking the military moustache with the stained forefinger.

"Don't be daft, Simons," Theo Colville laughed. "He'll eat you."

"Well, I can pay my whack as well as the next man," retorted the grocer edgily, "and mebbe better."

"We can at least have a drink before we go up to the billiard-room," observed Olly, rising to push the knob on the bell.

"Not for me," said Theo. "I'm going home."

"So am I," added Ben. "The wife will be wringing my neck as it is."

The waiter, appearing after a long interval, explained that all spirits were off.

"Beers, then," suggested Olly. "You, Mr. Simons—Bass, Worthington, Export, draught? There may be some lager."

The waiter explained that only Scotch Ale on draught was available.

"Three pints, then," said Mr. Pomphrey, as if he had unfortunately failed to secure the magnum of champagne his taste required. "Sure you want to play billiards, Simons?"

"I'm a man of my word," the small man asserted. "I'll stand by the bet."

"I'd better wait and keep the peace," laughed Chris Howie. "Cheers, boys!"

"Then let's take our tankards upstairs," said Olly. "I don't want to be late to-night."

He had the air of a medieval executioner, mellowed to tolerance by long experience of handling malefactors and persons of inferior accomplishment.

"Sure you wouldn't like a start of, say, twenty, Simons?" he suggested.

"I'll play you level and be damned to it!" growled the grocer unhappily. "Think I can't stand my whack?"

"That would never have occurred to me. In the Club, between gentlemen, I mean. Spot or plain?"

Mr. Pomphrey had for billiards much of the same natural genius as he had for cards. The prolonged leisure of his life, his inborn delicacy of physical touch, and his mathematical ability to concentrate on expertise in gentlemanly games involving both skill and financial risk had combined to produce a mastery over cue and ivory ball that, as Chris Howie viewed the proceedings from within the shadow cast by the hooded lamps over the gleaming baize, had the quality of great draughtsmanship at least.

The bank manager watched Olly play like a cat with the foolish mouse he had captured. The red ball left at a tempting but subtle angle to the middle pocket; the apparently obvious pot into a top pocket, but the red too near the cushion for any blunderer; the alluring cannon that would leave the tyro hopelessly in baulk. Mr. Simons had laboriously scored 17 when Olly, apparently bent on bringing a farce to an end, chalked his cue and ran up an exquisite unfinished break from 47 to game.

"Thank you, Mr. Simons," he said as he put his cue back in the rack. "Must have another game sometime."

"There's your money anyway," said the unhappy fat man, slapping notes on the table.

"Really!" exclaimed Olly. "Not wait for a drink?"

In his capacity of vice-chairman of the House Committee he was able to lead the banker down to the Steward's office for a last nobbler off the record, two doubles.

"Lord, Pomphrey!" laughed Chris Howie, "I wish I had your wits to live on."

"I wish," returned Olly primly, "some of our fellow-members would learn to behave like gentlemen. Chin-chin!"

Ten minutes later the brown bowler, the stovepipe trousers, the horsy coat and the malacca cane were proceeding uphill towards the Square and so into the incandescent-lighted and cat-smelling close of No. 20 Stornoway Street.

The cavalcade moved quietly and in order. It opened and closed the door of the attic flat with a nice regard for the peace of Miss Nimmo and young Kit, lest they were now preparing to retire. It had its ten minutes in the bathroom and then moved to its attic bed-sitting-room to roll a last cigarette and, before the gas-fire, to read those columns, devoted to Football and Racing, in the evening newspaper his hostess had thoughtfully left on his table.

Thus ended, on an April night of 1946, what he mildly regarded as a typical, uneventful, if rather unusually successful day in the life of Peter Oliphant Pomphrey, gentleman.

3

The nocturnal habits of Douglas Godenzi Nimmo were at once comically like and unlike those of Mr. Pomphrey. They were like in that both regularly sought the solace of exclusively male company in places set apart for that purpose, also in that the paying guest and the hostess's brother both looked to any evening among the boys to provide a man skilful in games with sufficient profit to cover incidental expenses.

One fundamental difference between the two men was that, whereas Olly fretted considerably over the status of the National and his choice of company therein, Duggie rejoiced in the non-filterable pool of humanity to be found in the British Legion. If Mr. Pomphrey favoured the Edwardian style of dress, Mr. Nimmo went to his evening fun in stained grey slacks and the frayed sports jacket of his demob outfit, with a paratrooper's camouflaged jerkin over all in bad weather. His thick black hair was never covered; and Ness was continually worried to know what the boy would have on his feet, for it could be anything from gum-boots to a pair of

rope-soled sandals from the Greek isles. The older man would never stoop lower in the matter of games than the level of Solo and regarded conventional billiards as his strongest suit so far as both profit and elegance were concerned. The younger considered the game of darts to be his most successful line but was open to any offer of a desperate gamble from Pontoon and Poker to a simple, decisive cut of the pack, quids on the table.

The true difference between these two attractive waifs of industrial society lay in their attitudes towards the use of such money as they might pick up in the course of a pleasant evening. Olly thought of coins and notes as means of sustaining a position ; Dug regarded his profits as the prop and stay of immediate fun for both winners and losers. For the last of the Pomphreys of Platt, Pomphrey's a world had still to be regained; for Captain Slocum's boy, the ex-Commando, life ended each day at midnight. To-morrow? Just another sick-making trip in an LCT and, quite likely, a pang, a gasp and a vomit on an alien beach. The thing was to have a hell of a lot of fun while it lasted.

The British Legion rooms towards which Duggie Nimmo now marched, swinging a blackthorn cudgel in contrast to Olly's malacca, had in its earliest dedication been the Long Walk of Finnie's Ropework. The Salvation Army had occupied it for a time ; then the West Scottish Motor Repair and Hiring Company. It had been a dance hall, the range of a short-lived rifle club, the temporary garage of a bus company, and then a N.A.A.F.I. canteen through the years when Garvel was at once the melting pot and battleground of the Royal Navy, the Merchant Navy, the Free French, the Dutch, the Americans, the Norwegians and the Poles. A N.A.A.F.I. canteen it remained in essential atmosphere on that evening of April, 1946, when Duggie Nimmo was the noisiest of a noisy group of ex-warriors round the darts-board in the corner by the bar.

Beer lay in pools on the counter under and around the pint measures that crowded its surface. Blue-brown smoke of Virginia tobacco swirled under the bare rafters. The hard consonants and curt Anglo-Saxon monosyllables of rough men would have troubled the ears of any detached visitor. The

sanctions of even the National were rejected within this sodality. Men quarrelled, shouted in argument, roared with laughter. The groupings of males were large and ebullient. That imaginary listener from the outer world would have heard, willy-nilly, that two subjects notably concerned these extrovert legionaries—money and the getting and spending thereof; and the hazards of battle, with particular reference to personal experience of hand-to-hand combat and the credit of various regimental formations.

It seemed that the war was still being fought under those naked rafters, with much beer and tobacco as the rations of the extended conflict. They could never forget their war, those men who had taken active and often violent parts in that majestic change in average conditions of living. They had loathed it while they were in it. They would in quiet moments, on both ethical and pragmatical grounds, condemn the procedure of arbitrament by arms among the nations. Yet almost all of them, like good enough men who may creep occasionally from the warm trust of the marriage bed to less sanctified excitements, could never forget the brightness of the eyes of danger, the special joys of the old masculine solidarity. One rasping command from the Chief Steward behind the bar, once a formidable Warrant Officer of the R.A.F., and all these milling, noisy men (you might think) would have snapped into silence and to attention, their thumbs down the seams of their trousers.

The Chief Steward had indeed cause to caution Ness Nimmo's younger brother for the clamour he was making round and about the darts-board.

"That'll do you, Duggie," he said quietly but regimentally into Duggie's ear as the latter, darts in hand, waited by the end of the bar for his next throw and belled criticism of Curly Grant's efforts. "This isn't Largs in '42."

"But the ruddy basket tried to come a fast one on me! Claimed a double eight when it was on the wrong side of the wire!"

"All right, all right!" agreed the steward, still quiet. "No need to make a rammy about it, just the same."

Duggie raised his beaker and swallowed two gills of beer in one hungry suck over the thick lip of the glass tankard.

Then he slammed it down and turned to grin genially at the Chief Steward.

"Sorry, Chiefie!" he smiled. "I'll be good. Damned if I know why I lose my rag so easily. There's something . . ."

He turned away to make his next throw, and the steward, father of five of his own, admired the toss of the head that sent the mop of black Italian hair back from the fine Italian profile. Duggie was one of the best: good soldier, double D.C.M. for gallantry at Anzio and Walcheren. Pity he could not settle down and get a decent job. But it was hard on these young chaps, caught up by war when they were too young to have started in a trade, too old now to begin at the bottom of the ladder. Learning the ways of mature men without the means to support the assumptions of adult manhood. There was certainly, as the poor lad had vaguely surmised, something.

The game ended, and the five shillings Duggie had finally won by the nimble placing of his first dart in double seven went in pints.

"Now, go easy, lad," the steward advised him over the bar. "No more beer and no more rammies or the committee'll have you out on your neck."

"Okay, Chiefie!" and Duggie smiled the lazy smile as of a contented peasant which was his invariable reaction from the high excitement that could transform him into a raging killer.

It was a busy night in the Legion Rooms, but the Chief Steward still had a wary eye for the table at which Duggie sat with his cronies. Tough eggs all, trained to kill in infinitely more intimate and brutal ways than the R.A.F. ever learned in its scientific detachment; dark men of the beaches and the islands and the ditches, schooled to think nothing of tossing a live grenade into an oil tank or blinding an enemy with one fierce poke of first and fourth fingers. Let them start a quarrel among themselves, or a stranger fall foul of them as a body, and the chairs would be flying, the tables overturned and the floor strewn with broken glass that Tod Sutherland, a Desert Rat if ever there was one, the scar of a razor-slash running from left temple to chin down his wizened face, would be all too ready to pick up and use in battle.

They were at the dominoes now, the Chief Steward

observed, and wonderfully quiet. Only twenty minutes to closing time ; another night with the dead-end kids nearly over. He had no good grounds for refusing Tod Sutherland's order for another round of five pints, but above the clatter of male talk in the long, low chamber he had not heard what had already passed between Tod and Duggie.

The issue was technical in the historic sense and indeed of only the remotest historical interest, but regimental rivalries and personal prides were involved. Who had or who had not forced the crossing of a remote stream in Sicily ? Their war was never finished ; the Truth had still to be established by the only methods these young men had ever learned.

"God Almighty !" Duggie was shouting now. "I was up to my neck in ruddy sewage before we heard your mob bumbling up to the ford. Late as usual."

"That's a ruddy lie," cried Tod, thrusting his face, like a small grey nut across the table. "I remember the Troop sayin' to me on the other side—*on the other side*, see ?—Sez he : 'Those web-footed bastards aren't up to the start-line yet. Late as usual,' sez he."

"He was a ruddy liar, then. We were across and beating up the Wops before the Armour had a clue. And who said something about web-feet ?"

"I said it. And I'll say it again if I want. Web-footed bastards, and a hell of a fine mob, I don't think !"

The figure of the steward loomed over the table, peremptorily saying : "That's enough of that," but he was too late for Duggie, who had thought out his move.

At least a gill of beer slashed into Tod Sutherland's eyes, and in a flash thereafter Duggie had whipped the light chair from under himself and held its four legs out to meet the counter-attack that must come. Their companions, rising, tipped over the table between the debaters, and one of them pinioned the steward. The blade of a knife flashed in Tod Sutherland's right hand ; he ducked to get at his enemy under the legs of the chair. Duggie's right toe got him in the mouth, and he fell face-down on the floor, crying in pain through bruised and bloodied lips.

"That's enough now !" cried the pinioned steward.

All that great concourse of men rose to its feet and shouted.

Just a few of the clear-headed among them (for many were inclined to take sides and continue the battle) rushed to pounce on Ness Nimmo's brother, while others fell on Tod Sutherland and, holding his face to the dirty floor, wrenched the knife from his tenacious fingers.

"Chuck those hooligans out!" several voices cried.

"Aye, and never let them in again," one lone observer added.

Douglas Godenzi Nimmo was being carried out of the Legion Rooms, face downwards but still trying to bite the hands of one of his bearers, just as his brother Quintin entered the premises for the first time in his life.

4

"Well, that's that," said Ness as, from the kitchen sink, she heard the front door close behind her brother Quintin. "I wonder where he's away to?"

"He would never tell you, so why worry?" asked Kit, drying up the supper dishes.

"I don't know," Ness mused as she scoured the grease from an enamelled basin. "You know where you are with Olly and Dug. One's going down to the National Club, and the other's going to that silly British Legion of his. But you just never know where you are with Quin, he's so secretive. He leaves all the rest of us out of it. I think," she added in an apparently irrelevant flash of intuition, "I think he's terribly ambitious."

"You *think*!" laughed the girl beside her. "That's the whole truth about our dear Quintin. He's eaten up with it, looking everywhere for influence and the chance to be important, and he believes he deserves it. But don't forget, Ness, that Dug and Olly are ambitious in their own ways, too."

"Dug and Olly! Lord, I wish they were! When did you see one of them doing a hand's turn?"

"But that's just it, don't you see? That's their ambition—to have a jolly good time without doing anything about it; and they're managing quite nicely, thank you. Quin's

different," said Kit, drying four fish-forks at once. "A man like Olly wants life round about him to be what he thinks his breeding deserves. Quin wants his to be what he honestly thinks his superior brains entitle him to—even if that's ending a sentence with a proposition. And you can't deny he's clever. Now, I'm clever . . ."

"I know you are, dear!" Ness readily and loyally agreed.

"Don't interrupt in that silly way, Ness!" she was scolded. "I mean, I'm clever enough with books and things, lessons, exams—all that sort of stuff. But Quin's clever with people as well. He's watching people all the time, even you and me and Olly and Dug; waiting to jump in if we make a mistake, even in a family joke. He's simply got to be on the top of everybody else all the time. . . . It's a pity, and I'm sorry for Quin, being what he is," this unusual girl concluded, "but you know, of course, it's money he really wants."

Ness stood working the agreeable grit of chemical solvent into her hands and fingers.

"Do you think I don't want money?" she asked lightly.

"Of course you do, silly! And you want it to spend on the house and other people. But Quin wants it for himself. He needs it—like me just *needing* to get the first place in the Bursary lists. I was reading something the other day, something a man called Lord Acton wrote. . . ."

"Well, we'd better put those dishes away," Ness interrupted primly. "And I must say, Katherine Nimmo, that's an awful way to talk about your brother."

"I was just telling you what you really think," said Kit, carrying the laden tin tray to the deal table.

Ness watched the girl as, with her always surprising swiftness of movement, she put away the supper things in cupboards and drawers, and saw that here was another problem, infinitely more important and painful to herself than that represented by Quin. She could remember every word of what the Rector of the Grammar School had said when she had gone one day, trembling, to interview him about Kit's future. To think now that she had ever dreamed, even under the dreadful economic compulsion on the indigent respectable, that Kit might have to be sent out at fifteen to earn a living and bring something into the house!

"Katherine is quite the most remarkable girl that has ever come under my charge, Miss Nimmo. Sometimes, when I speak to her, the maturity of her mind almost frightens me. But that's another question perhaps. . . . She is popular, she plays a good game of hockey. All I can tell you as a professional pedagogue, Miss Nimmo, is that your sister has a brilliant academic future, almost certainly. To pull her out now and send her into some third-rate job in an office or a shop would be a crime : I mean that, a crime. She'll take Arts, of course, with an emphasis on Philosophy and Economics. The school can do something about getting her pushed on to Oxford, Cambridge. . . . Do you ever think, Miss Nimmo, that the incidence of a girl like Katherine is one of the few, rare, incredibly lovely rewards of a life devoted to teaching? That can be tolerably sickening, you know."

He was a handsome, youngish man with a good suit of rough tweed and a crimson tie under the soft collar of a good blue shirt.

The strange thing was that she had taken this special problem to Quintin, who had almost violently agreed with the Rector. Ness did not know that Quin abhorred the waste even of brains. She had merely put it to herself that you never knew where you were with those clever people. And now she saw where her own passionate ambition lay and why she wished for money. It was simply that Kit might go to the University and be a credit to them all and be as free as any woman might be from the fear of poverty. Not that that solved the problem of Quin, the mysterious citizen who was now, his soft black hat pulled down over his long nose, making his way downhill to a promising rendezvous.

Quintin Macneur Nimmo was so called after paternal grandparents and thus represented in a way little Captain Slocum's only successful effort to keep the intrusive "Godenzi" out of the family names. He was at the age of thirty managing clerk to the respectable local firm of Brydie & Bryden, Solicitors and Notaries Public. That B. & B.'s was not exactly one of the fat practices, deeply rooted in the trusts and marriage contracts and what not of the West End families, everybody in Garvel knew ; and Quintin had a more acute awareness than most of his professional position. Probably, he sometimes

thought, all the innumerable fools in the town assumed that he would sit on his backside until, in middle-age, he would be taken into junior partnership with Monty Bryden : the original Lucius Brydie being dead these many years, and forgotten. That was where they were wrong. Quintin, assessing the situation as by dint of scent through his twitching nose, had made quite sure that Monty Bryden looked to two nephews, out of the R.A.F. and the R.N.V.R. respectively, to succeed him, and had thus recently reconsidered his prospects and his plans.

It had been in his mind for a time that an approach towards Miss Bunty Bryden might be fruitful. Monty's only daughter, however, was seven years his senior and a Badminton champion of outstanding physique, and fastidiousness went with Quin's nice care for his own professional advantage. Moreover, Monty's concern for his precious nephews clearly demonstrated to Quin that his own social position was not regarded as being quite top drawer.

The heart being thus in no way involved, he had completely altered his plan within the last three months. A survey of the legal situation in Garvel had satisfied him that old Rowley Peacock was his man. The rich picture of himself filling old Rowley's chair warmed his mind delightfully as now he marched through the April dusk towards an important meeting in the office of his friend, Matthew D. Crockart, C.A.

Quintin's was a bleak mind, as a majority of people would perhaps understand it. It was hard against concessions to the common weaknesses of suffering humanity ; it would, faced with the immediate problem of a fellow-creature in distress, such as a child knocked over by a bus, have to consider the pros and cons of the case for assistance. It operated as that of an engineer before a series of gauges, as that of a scientist who rejoices in a reaction displayed by an expiring frog. If he was almost a parody of the traditional miser, it was thus that God had made him ; and to himself he was richly sufficient. Now, as he made his way towards the meeting, he warmly enjoyed the beauty and risk of the pattern he was weaving, and with the equivalent of the joy of the sculptor who feels the clay working into living shape under his inspired fingers.

Old Rowley Peacock was 73 now. (Quintin had looked

up the registers.) A rip in his day, a slab of self-indulgence in his old age, he was allowing a fine old family practice to run to seed in Quintin's severe view. Ran his office on a decaying cashier and one silly girl. Wouldn't employ a procurator and was himself incompetent to appear in court. He had had to borrow Quin from B. & B. to appear for one of his clients, an old-fashioned stevedore bemusedly involved in a compensation case. And the old chap, when it was all over and Quintin had successfully won the Sheriff's judgment, had said in a rheumy wheeze over his four-in-hand tie: "Brilliant, my boy! Never heard cross-examination like it since Hugh Macmillan. I'll put through something special in the way of fees to Monty Bryden. See you get your whack. We might have a useful talk one of these days, young fellow."

The situation was promising, interesting.

Matt Crockart, dark and alert, was at his desk, a pipe between his teeth, as Quin entered and hung up his light raglan overcoat. They merely nodded with the familiarity of men who have studiously arranged a given situation.

"Our friend's not here yet," observed Matt, his eyes still on the papers before him. "Probably having a good bucket in the Wheatsheaf. He lives on the stuff."

"More fool he. More reason why he should get his affairs tied up."

"You've said it. Mind if I go on with these accounts?"

"Carry on. I haven't read the evening paper."

Twenty minutes later, and thus some fifteen minutes late for the appointment, there wheezed into the room a man of incredible grossness.

His legs were as pegtops supporting the enormous sphere of his belly. His head seemed to lie far back behind a fleshy escarpment of bosom. He carried with him the sour smells of a public-house recently visited, grievously complicated by the stink of a cheroot that rested, as if forgotten, in the left corner of a large mouth. His mode of dress was at once flashy and untidy in the Jewish manner, and Quintin's fastidiousness made him think unhappily of buttons near to popping off at many points over a large area of underclothing. He appreciated, however, the quick cut and thrust of the little black eyes as they took in the room and the persons of his advisers.

"Well, chaps!" the newcomer opened the discussion with a wheeze and a rheumy clearing of the tubes, but in the authentic accent of Clydeside.

This was no Jew. This was the famous Alf Allison, the miraculous builder of a chain of fruit and newspaper shops for many miles round about; the man with a vulgar genius for advertising himself and his business; the man who had bought the Garvel United when it was relegated to the Second Division and ingeniously managed and financed its triumphant return to near the head of the First in a couple of seasons; the man who . . . But there was no end to the local legend of Alf's cantrips, triumphs, stratagems and surprises.

"So youse two," he grunted, fitting his person into an office chair with wooden arms, "youse two want me to turn myself into a limited liability? Me that started with a barrow of bananas and about fifteen bob capital! Okay, give me the dope, boys, and no shennanikin."

"That's easy enough, Mr. Allison," said Matt Crockart, starting smoothly according to the agreed programme.

It was a sound discourse from the actuarial point of view, but Quintin, sitting as it were apart, saw the signs of non-understanding and disbelief slowly confessing themselves on the sallow face that was at once so ugly and so suggestive of a supreme cunning.

"I wouldn't quite put it that way, Matt," he was finally compelled to intervene.

The mass of Alf Allison slewed in Quin's direction.

"You've said it, chum," he declared. "This chap's talkin' away above my nut. Now you spill the beans. I'll be listenin'."

"Mr. Crockart was speaking as an accountant," Quin started with a little cough. "He was using actuarial terms, and the mere fact that you couldn't quite follow him shows, Mr. Allison, that you really ought to think of getting all your large interests organised on a sound footing."

"Izzat so?" asked Mr. Allison with, in his tone, a nice mixture of challenge and disbelief.

"There's a Labour Government in power."

"You're telling me! The bastards."

"And they don't have, they can't have, any love for profitable private enterprise."

"Are you trying to learn your grandmother to suck eggs?"

"They get you, as an individual trader, all round the ring. Your personal allowances for tax purposes are nothing in relation to your income, Mr. Allison. Do you get anything like a proper allowance for expenses?"

"By God, and I don't!" wheezed the fruiterer with passion.

"And that, sir," continued Quintin smoothly, "is precisely because you insist on trading as an individual. Whereas, as the managing director of a limited liability company, *all* your business expenses would be properly charged to the firm; they wouldn't touch your personal account at all. You would have advantages every way: such as the company carrying E.P.T. while you draw the managing director's salary and expenses. You could do all sorts of things. . . ."

"What sort of things?" asked Alf Allison.

"I'll give you an example," returned Quintin promptly. "A client of ours bought a new car, a Girling Fifteen, at sixty or thereabouts. He wanted it for himself, of course, but he put it on his company's books as part of the business. It was written down on the books to four seven five. Then within the year a friend of his wanted a new car, ready to pay any price. So our client bought the car from his own firm for four seven five and sold it to his pal for a thousand."

"Gees, but that was smart!"

"Perfectly legitimate just the same," Quintin waved a careless hand. "Or take another thing. If you decide to form a company, there's nothing to prevent you appointing your wife or your daughter as secretary at two-fifty or five hundred a year: it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it now?" exclaimed Alf Allison, the bulk of him rustling with interest in his chair.

"No. If you were to appoint Mr. Crockart here as auditor, his fee is a deduction for tax purposes. Just the same if you were ever to ask me for legal advice."

Alf Allison started to laugh. His body heaved, his jowls seemed almost to flap. Very little sound, however, came out of that vastly amused frame.

"So that's where youse two come in!" he cackled at length. "Ye're a smart pair of boys, right enough."

"You're getting some very valuable advice just the same, Mr. Allison," said Matt Crockart, breaking silence smoothly.

"Fair enough! Fair enough!" the fat man gasped through a bout of coughing. "To tell you the God's truth, I'm gettin' fed up knocking my pan out on the shops and gettin' next to dam' all left me once the tax is paid. Come on now, and we'll talk turkey. . . ."

The business proceeded. As the hour of discussion passed, Alf Allison watched every move of the game, like a wary bison cornered by two hungry but circumspect wolves, and Quentin learned to respect the gross man's shrewdness. At the same time there waxed within him the faith that he had at length contrived that major stroke, which would now allow him to approach old Rowley Peacock with a substantial connection in hand. Allison's Stores, Ltd.; it would be a dripping roast!

Alf Allison hitched his person up from the confines of the wooden chair at length.

"Well, that's about that," he said. "Youse two young chaps can carry on with this limited business. But fair horny, mind ye, or I'll give you both hell in ways you wouldny expect."

He succeeded in persuading his short legs once more to support the mass of his torso. This creature out of the new commercial world then suddenly smiled on his younger advisers with a kindliness which Quentin, at least, could never have compassed.

"Hell, but it's a short life!" he surprisingly announced. "It's a good bucket we're needing. We'll go up to the Legion. The Chief Steward up there's a pal of mine's."

Mr. Allison had a large Humber waiting somewhere in a side street. By putting his first and fourth fingers together to his mouth he produced a blast that might have brought the Burgh Police rushing to a scene of crisis, but did in fact bring his machine purring to the kerb outside Matt Crockart's office, its large and warmly-rugged interior smartly lighted by a cunning lamp in the roof.

"Tumble into the back, chaps," said Alf genially. "This big belly of mine's'll only fit into the front. See's a hand there, Charlie."

Quintin Macneur Nimmo could hardly abide the idea of waste, even of other people's money. He disapproved of a 17-h.p. car when the owner's purposes could be very well served by an infinitely smaller and cheaper article. He felt no need to celebrate the conclusion of a business deal with alcohol, which was only one way of paying indirect taxation at a fantastic rate. As the big car swept up-town, however, the peak of the chauffeur's cap taking the gleam of municipal lights, Quintin rejoiced in the circumstances. This was success ; this was the expression of power achieved.

"Here's us, chaps," said Alf as the car stopped before a dimly-lighted porch, and then he laughed, "Help the blind, there must have been a rammy !"

Quintin then saw his younger brother hustled out of the Legion Hall, face downwards but still gnawing at the imprisoning hands. He turned painfully-raised eyebrows towards Matt Crockart, who in return frowned a warning to keep silence.

Alf Allison laughed easily.

"Some poor guy's had a pint too much, but that's nothing in this joint. Wait, youse two, till I get your name in the book."

5

"Well, if you're going to settle down to your lessons," said Ness, "I'll just run downstairs with this frock for Peggy Buchan. Will you be all right, now ?"

Kit laughed : "No, I'm sure to be debauched by too much spherical geometry. Oh, run away, Ness, and don't be daft ! You're like an old hen sometimes. And don't pretend to me that you don't want a good long gossip with Mrs. Buchan."

"Of all the cheek !" retorted Ness, but mildly.

The girl settled down at the kitchen table and opened her Mathematics folder. She glanced up at the cold incandescent mantle on its short bracket above the mantelpiece and thought what a sad confession of poverty and meanness it was, so hard on her own strained eyes. The train of thought ran out of the flat and across the landing to the Misses McJannet, who owned

the property and would do not a thing to improve it. Black women, always peering through the slit of the letter-box, darkly entertaining each other with scandal and lurid imaginings. The ugly, black-dressed, mean-minded Misses McJannet, who left a reek of mothballs, even more powerful than that of the cats, every time they went down the stairs, but were still the most smugly pious of Martyrs U.F. congregation.

What a fate ! How terrible because of its ordinariness the tragedy of the unattractive spinster in the dwindling *rentier* group of society. (It would be a good topic for Citizenship but a bit hard on poor Miss Harkness, the lady superintendent. Too near the bone of the personal inadequacy that made her the querulous pest of the younger females in her charge.) It was something to have brains after all, the chance of escaping the sombre nonentity of the Misses McJannet, the prospect of the dreaming spires in the sunlit South beyond the clausturation of marginal poverty up a close in wet West Scotland.

Kit's restlessness would not let her be, even when she put all the force of her considerable power of concentration and her delight in knowledge towards a better understanding of the Calculus. She had not pulled the blind, and her eyes rested on a mating pair of pigeons crooning to each other among the chimneypots down the road. Such adorable iridescence of feather on neck and bosom in the evening light ! Such a gloriously strange subtlety of natural selection ! And from the tennis court in the angle of the tenement buildings at the corner there rose the claims and cries of a mixed foursome, happy in the game even in the failing light.

There was beauty as well as duty in the complex human theorem. There was love to offset brains, to bemuse and overturn brains, indeed. Kit blushed and trembled though she sat alone. There filled her vision the angle of a boy's face seen from behind and to his right hand : the fair eminence of the eyebrow, the lovely moulding of cheek and jaw in a male growing to handsome manhood. Harry Pettigrew, the School Captain. He had been nice to her ; he had seen her home from the Sixth Form dance. Even if she wore spectacles. He aimed at the Colonial Service, and Kit thought her heart must break if he went away to Nigeria or one of those places. Now, in fact, she started to cry a little and foolishly.

She rose and crossed the dark lobby to the room she shared with Ness. The lowest of a chest of drawers slipped sweetly to her pull, for it was the work of a fine craftsman, the father she could hardly remember. Within tissue-paper wrappings was the white dress Ness had fashioned for her to wear at the Sports Eve dance, with it the gossamer underclothes her sister had cut and stitched and embroidered, working sometimes into the early morning hours so that she, Katherine Godenzi Nimmo, could stand up beside the richest girl in the school and be not ashamed. Kit stroked the soft fabrics, all virginal white, chaste and adorable. Then she started to cry again.

What girl on earth had such a sister as Ness? There could be no finer woman than Ness : so calm, so hard-working, so true, so brave. So simple, too, with her acceptance of all the burdens she conceived it to be her duty to bear—catering for Olly, putting up with Quin, being patient with Dug, being proudly ambitious for her young sister ; working always, complaining never. She made you feel a selfish fool. Now the thought of her sister's goodness swamped Kit in a tidal wave of love that frightened her with its fullness.

She stood by the bedroom window awhile, the tears drying on her cheeks, and wondered what response she could make to that overwhelming care. Ah ! she began to smile to herself, she could hear that familiar voice saying simply and even a little flatly : “ Now, get on with your lessons, dear.”

It was so little to give back to Ness, especially since it pleased herself. She returned to the kitchen and now pulled down the blue cotton blind, locking herself in with the inexorable science of Maths. But it could never be a complete escape. A girl had still a heart as well as a head, nor could she ever forget it.

6

Being but eighteen years of age, Kit could see only the woman Ness had made of herself, the mature self-portrait she had fashioned to fit most conveniently into the tapestry of living. She could not know that, across the threshold of her own home in the darkness of the stairs, her sister became again

a frightened girl until the bustling kindness of the Buchan household lapped her in warmth and security. Kit would have been heartbroken to know that, while she waited for one of the Buchan people to answer her ring, Ness trembled and listened like a child left in an empty house.

It was twenty years old now, her fantastic fear of the tenement stairs. She had been a girl much like Kit, eager on the edge of romance, but more tremulous in the greater innocence of the period. She had throughout the Tennis Club dance adored the profile of Len Sculthorp, the moulding of his dark face from brow to jaw. Every third dance he had demanded, this Sculthorp boy of the great shipbuilding family with its baronial mansion in the West End. He must especially have the last dance to hold her deliriously close in the langour of the belated waltz—"Charmaine," it had been.

They had walked up the hill over the frosted pavements under the January stars, and her own silly eyes, the Lord knew, were starry with illusion to feel the strong hold of his right forearm under her left, the warmth through his overcoat penetrating her own thin garments ! Then the moment within the close that should have been the exquisite moment of soft good-night and sweet promise but was, instead, the moment of humiliation : the pounce of pantherine desire, the tearing of fine fabrics and of the ever-so-much more exquisite fabric of her idealism. The heat of the struggle, and her fingers clawing at the dark face. A push against the wall and a coarse word of contempt, and she was left sobbing over the wreck of a private world, shattered and smeared.

Ness had long ago learned to understand what had overtaken Len Sculthorp and forgiven him in her own mind, but not her mother. Still statuesque and handsome, though the cancer had already started to work in her, Carlotta Godenzi had sat up in the kitchen hoping to hear (as Ness thought now) news of a romantic success. In her Latin way she had frequently impressed on her daughter the importance of a good marriage and the promise of this young Mr. Sculthorp in particular. And when Ness ran in, trembling and even shaken with a hard, agonised sobbing, and blurted out what had happened to her, her own mother turned on her with cold and contemptuous ferocity.

“ Fool ! A woman of nearly nineteen to go into hysterics when a young man makes a pass, as young men will ! Who are you to imagine yourself a fairy princess in a foolish story ? Stop that screaming, girl, and go to your bed. There,” she added bitterly, “ you may lie alone long enough.”

Ness knew nothing of the jargon of psychiatry, but she had come to perceive how the events of that night had created within her a fatal dichotomy from which, with all her renowned common sense, she could not escape. Twenty years ago ; and when she was on the tenement stairs after sunset she was still a frightened girl, listening for lascivious footsteps, afraid like an imaginative infant that the spirit of Carlotta Godenzi, by nature beyond any understanding of idealism, had somehow escaped from the oak coffin as it was carried downstairs and lingered in the shadows to haunt her criminally sentimental daughter.

The door of the flat below, right, was mercifully and promptly opened to her by Mr. Buchan himself, the evening newspaper in one hand.

“ Come in, Miss Nimmo ! ” he invited in his loud, hearty shipyard voice. “ My wife’s washing up, and the kids are all over the place, but just go right into the kitchen. Janet will be glad to see you. Janet ! Here’s Miss Nimmo to see you.”

Four children romped and chattered about the kitchen and across the lobby. Young Peggy exclaimed over her party frock, her eyes goggling, and must try it on. She pirouetted in the natural way of young females in new garments, and Ness frowned professionally and said the frock might do with a bit taken in over the hips, and Mrs. Buchan said nonsense ; it was beautiful, and you had to allow for growth in a girl, especially at Peggy’s critical age. Then the children were sent to bed, and Ness was called in to tickle the little ones before they would settle down. Mr. Buchan being still engaged with his evening paper in the parlour, the ladies brewed a pot of tea and enjoyed an hour of chat about this and that, from the best way to manage the rations to the irregular practices with her ashbin of Mrs. Titheridge, the Congregational minister’s wife in the front-door flat, left, and an intimate passage on the problems confronting the female parent or guardian of a girl approaching puberty.

"But just look at the time!" exclaimed Ness at length.

"What's your hurry?" asked Mrs. Buchan, a bright woman with queerly intense eyes.

"It's been lovely, Mrs. Buchan, but I thought I'd just slip across for a minute and see poor old Mr. and Mrs. Merriweather. They're lonely."

"They'll love to see you. But before you go—I wish you'd wait, just the same—before you go, what about the wee bit account for Peggy's frock?"

"Och, I'll send you a note!"

"You will not. Andrew would murder me if I don't pay cash on the spot. If ever a man hated debts hanging over his head . . ."

"Well, we'll make it seven-and-six."

"We will not!" cried the hostess with sharp indignation. "It'll be double that at the very least, or my name's not Janet Buchan."

"Make it ten, then."

"No, I will not. The work you put into it . . ."

The kitchen door opened, its whole area apparently filled by the tall and burly form of Andrew Buchan, erect in a somewhat tight suit of shiny blue serge.

"You two writing off the National Debt!" he laughed easily. "Here, Miss Nimmo, I heard what you were talking about, and let me tell you that if you asked me to build you a ship, it would cost you about four times the pre-war price. Never write down your own labour value, even among friends. Janet'll send your bill up to-morrow by one of the children."

The blunt sense of the man, which was a sort of honest and kindly tact, filled Ness with the glow of gratitude. What a happy woman Janet must be to have such a fine man for her husband! Ness felt that she could give them and their children much of her love, if only for the solid, noisy, hearty normality of the lives and attitudes they allowed her to share.

"That's kind of you, Mr. Buchan," said Ness, blushing.

"Now, I wonder if the old folk are still up?"

"I'll go to the door with you, and we'll hear if their wireless is still blaring."

To cross the lobby with him was like walking with a possible lover. This woman approaching middle-age could

not know that Andrew Buchan was the symbol of her dreaming need for security and affection. It was all the better that he was quite offhanded.

"They're still going strong," he laughed quietly, his hand on the glass door-knob, "hitting on all four valves. Good-night, Miss Nimmo. Nice of you to come down with the dress for Peggy."

"Good-night, Mr. Buchan."

It was wonderfully comforting that he should hold his own door ajar until old Mrs. Merriweather had opened hers an inch or two, timidly.

"It's all right, Mrs. Merriweather," he called strongly. "Miss Nimmo to see you for a minute or two."

Both the old Merriweathers were deaf now. Her need to speak loudly reversed, in a trice, the position of admiring dependence Ness must assume among the urgent, hearty Buchans. The old Merriweathers were so sweet, so genteel, so frail, so feckless, so pathetic. Their only children, twin boys, had gone within an hour of each other in one day of bloodshed at Passchendaele long ago; the rest had been twilight, now deepening to the last darkness.

Ness was conscious of being deliberately bright with them, and they still liked to hear the little bits of news she could give them. They had sentimentally adopted Kit; and was she getting on well with her studies? the silvery old man wanted to know, a frail hand cupped round his good right ear; and was she in good health with all that study? the old lady must know. Quintin was doing well at the Law, the old man was sure: himself the retired cashier of a sugar refining company; and the old lady thanked God that Douglas had been spared, such a fine, strong, handsome fellow. And Mr. Pomphrey . . .

"Not many real gentlemen left these days," Mr. Merriweather opined. "One of our great families."

"And always so tidy, so spruce. It's a pleasure to see a gentleman so well turned out. And now I'll go and put the kettle on."

"No, you won't indeed, Mrs. Merriweather!" Ness protested. "I'm this minute running upstairs to make Kit's supper. I'll just leave this with you."

The fortnightly ritual proceeded according to the book.

Ness laid on the table a bag of strong blue paper containing about half a pound of sugar. Old Mrs. Merriweather asked in a happy pipe, what was this now? Sugar! It was wonderful of dear Miss Nimmo, but she could not possibly dream of thinking of . . . One person's whole ration for one whole week! And Ness said it was no use to her at all, with five books in the house and only two of them taking sugar in their tea. And for the poor, useless, charming Merriweathers the visit of Ness was altogether as a Fair Holiday to the industrial workers in the crowded country of shipyards, engineering shops, textile mills and sugar refineries round about them.

It was not much less important to Ness, this occasional calling on her fellow-prisoners of the tenement building. She needed more than she would ever have admitted to herself the assurance of kindness in the world, the robust good nature of the Buchan's strengthening her, the sweet dependence of the Merriweather's flattering the sense of strength within herself. It would have been a happier little world no doubt if the Misses McJannet had been nice people, but the majority was for decency. Of course, No. 20 Stornoway Street being one of those queer three-flatted tenements with two front-door flats flanking the close, the humble folk on the upper storeys were largely cut off by subtle social barriers from those who paid the Misses McJannet higher rents for entrances of their own and a two-yard strip of tufted grass and laurel between them and the pavement.

Ness ran up the double flight of stairs more confidently than she had descended them and was pleased to believe she was back in her own house before one of the Misses McJannet could get to the slit of the letter-box. As she entered the kitchen, and without looking up from her books, Kit said:

"The wanderer returns at last."

"Goodness, is it that time already!"

"It always is," observed Kit.

"And time you were getting to your own bed, my girl," Ness retorted. "Put away those books now while I get the breakfast laid. If you haven't got that table cleared by the time I've got the meal for the porridge on to soak . . ."

"You'll put poison in it, I suppose."

Always a great girl for her little dry joke was Kit. Life

with the child alone would be easily manageable, perhaps positively happy, but when a woman had Quin to deal with, and the problem of Duggie on her mind all the time, never mind the hours bent over the sewing-machine. . . . Now she came to think of it in a quick flash of illumination, Ness realised that her dearest dream was to see her brothers out of the house : the one settled in a partnership and married—though God help the girl !—the other solidly placed in a job in some vague foreign place. She and Kit and Olly would then be content.

When Quin came in, as usual the first of the men to return, Ness knew at once that unpleasantness was in the air. With one of his snarls he refused her offer to make him a cup of tea. He slumped down in the basket chair by the fire with the local newspaper, perusing its blameless columns in jerky snippets as it were. Ness wished he wouldn't always manhandle a paper so violently ; the snap and crackle of it under his nervous fingers got on her nerves. Finally he crushed the sheet under his fist on the kitchen table.

"I've just about had enough of Duggie's habits," he declared, as if these were her responsibility.

"What's wrong now ?" she asked fearfully.

"Flung out of the British Legion rooms to-night. Drunk and disorderly, I suppose ; probably in a brawl. And, if you please, just as I was going into the place with an extremely important client !"

"Oh dear !"

"What the devil's the use of saying that ?"

"What *can* I say ?"

"Well, you can't say I haven't tried to do my best for him."

That was the ironical truth. Whether for his own comfort or not, Quin had got Dug placed, first, in a very decent and interesting outside job with the Harbour Trust. That had lasted six weeks, the Traffic Manager finally telling Quintin :

"He's a decent big lad ; I like Duggie, but I just can't spare the time always digging him out of McEntee's Bar when he should be in the transit sheds. I'm sorry, and it's a pity. The war, I suppose."

Again, through Quin's influence, Duggie was found a place

with the prospect of a partnership in chicken-farming, that second last resort of the maladjusted males of the *bourgeoisie*. There was, however, no great amount of fun as Duggie required it on the uplands of Ayrshire, and poultry inspired him to neither interest nor industry. He came home ostensibly to recover from a bout of recurrent malaria, but smiling remotely as always, and they all knew he was home again to stay.

"To tell you the truth, Miss Nimmo," Olly had said with a shrewder understanding of the case than Quintin could ever bring to it, "what the poor chap wants is another war."

Now Quintin said: "What we want to do with that lazy lout is raise his passage to Australia and let him make the best of it."

"And where's the money to come from?" asked Ness unhappily.

"Don't ask me," said her brother. "I'm going to bed."

Mr. Pomphrey returned shortly, opened the kitchen door and bobbed to his hostess.

"I'll say good-night, Miss Nimmo. I hope you have a good rest."

"Thank you, Mr. Pomphrey. Can I not make you a cup of tea?"

"Thank you, no. I have a biscuit in my room. Good-night, Miss Nimmo."

"Good-night, Mr. Pomphrey."

They had been saying exactly the same thing to each other every night for years, but Ness valued the thin little courtesies. They were more than she ever got from Quin, and Dug was never there to offer them.

She moved slowly through the last offices of her domestic service, always with that foolish and hopeless superstition that her younger brother might one night come home reasonably early to be friendly and open about himself. It was nearly midnight when she turned away from the old illusion.

Kit was asleep, *Sons and Lovers* open on her heaving breast. Ness closed the book, turned the unresisting body face to the wall, and tidied the clothes about the young shoulders of her

little sister. Herself, she heard midnight striking from McCulloch's Clock on its steeple ; in due course, one o'clock. She was not worried, being long accustomed to a low level of satisfaction in her circumstances. She was rather a displaced person, bewildered but disciplined to patience, only the next thing mattering much.

Meanwhile, the immediate object of her concern sat on the third step from the bottom in the mouth of the close.

Douglas Godenzi Nimmo suspected a black eye and was positively conscious of bruised lips ; he anticipated a hang-over of the most miserable sort within the next few hours. Damned fool, to get into that rammy with Tod Sutherland ; but quite beyond hope to mooch round to the bar of Blackwood's Hotel and get into another fist-fight with Jerry Hunter the insurance man over the head of the barmaid, Cis Blackie, who was only a long-toothed bitch of a gold-digger when all was said and done.

Duggie did not spare himself. He knew with a perfection nobody else could compass what a fool he was. He perceived clearly the nature of his imprisonment by too easy slidings into drink and violence. But he could not see at this late hour how he could escape, for the simple faiths had gone out of his system shortly after, at the Lofotens, he had chucked his first grenade into an oil tank and seen it go up with a roar. He had tasted power, and now could not find the means to express his sense of it. . . . Poor old Ness ! She did not know what a wreck had come back to her to be looked after.

He shook his head violently like a dog and rose from his cold seat on the stairs. His journey upstairs was not, within his now considerable experience, such a sketchy affair as might have been expected. Indeed, he felt he was moving with the greatest circumspection and regard for the feelings of others.

Ness heard him come in, thinking that he moved like a carthorse and praying that he would not bring down something with a smash or, as he once had done for mischief, start jangling all the old-fashioned bells on their coiled springs in the kitchen with the window-pole, so that the Misses McJannet threatened a lawyer's letter. It was most important that he should get into his bed in the same room with Quin without

too much clamour, or there would be hell to pay in the morning.

Still, that was one day over. There would be another to face to-morrow, but Ness had got used to facing the days as they came.

CHAPTER TWO

NOUGHTS AND CROSSES

I

AT THE rounded corner by the Linen Bank, where Thorn Lane tumbles over a mild waterfall of steps to run into the main street of Garvel, Mr. P. Oliphant Pomphrey stood waiting, the stained forefinger flicking the military moustache more times in every minute than was usual with him. While he sought to sustain the attitude of indifference proper to a gentleman, a close observer would have seen that his eyes were apt to concentrate on a point some two hundred yards to his right, and that a slight frown darkened them whenever a bus came between them and a clear sight of whatsoever Mr. Pomphrey hoped to see.

At this hour of a Saturday evening in April the shopping street of the town was occupied by working folk and their children, moving in slow procession like people at an exhibition. Persons of Olly's class—as he would have phrased it without prejudice—did not go “down the town” at such a time on such a day without some special compulsion. Olly's brown bowler and horsy coat, in fact, stirred in many of the passers-by the incredulous jocularly the British public brings to the unfamiliar. Those slowly-tramping folk of an industrial region, every little group continually halting to stare into a shop window and exclaim at either the beauties it contained or the prices demanded, could not help on this one evening of their freedom regarding Olly as either an intruder or a freak, or both.

While Olly fidgeted at the Linen Bank corner, a decent riveter out of Tod & Bannerman's yard approached with his prematurely fat wife and their only child, a small boy with smears of toffee apple about his nostrils and down his chin. The spectacle presented by Miss Nimmo's paying guest so enchanted the infant that he removed the toffee apple from

his face, hesitated in his tracks, and said in a loud, flat voice :

“ Aw help, Maw ! Look at that funny man ! ”

“ Hold your tongue, now ! ” the matron rebuked the child with equal loudness, but calmly. “ And keep you your eyes to yourself. How many times have I told you, James McNab, it's not manners to stare ? ”

“ He's an awful funny man, just the same,” the boy insisted.

They were not quite out of earshot when the father explained to his wife : “ That's old Pomphrey. His folk were in the shipowning line, but that one's never done a hand's turn in all his born days.”

In the face of these conditions Olly did not find it difficult to sustain the attitude of indifference proper to a person of breeding in the presence of the lower orders. The main force of his far from powerful mind was in fact still bent in quite another direction. His eyes ranged beyond the mere passers-by, even beyond the intervening buses, to an improbable but attainable heaven into which, quite shortly, he might be admitted.

Peter Oliphant Pomphrey was in that moment a symbolic figure, representing the prayerful waiting of millions of his British fellow-citizens. That afternoon some hundreds of young men had played Association football for the immediate entertainment of a few hundred thousand citizens, but for every one of those who had witnessed the play there were scores to pine for the moment when the results of football matches fought out through the length and breadth of the British island could be ascertained with absolute certainty. Olly's was perhaps the extreme case of concern. As he stood at the corner by the Linen Bank, he was, nevertheless, a representative of the national culture of his period, waiting for the appearance on the streets of that green sheet which the proprietors of the *Garvel Courier and Shipping Intelligence* described with splendid emphasis in a stubby black type as their SPORTS FINAL NIGHT EXTRA.

Other sheets, rushed by train and van from the great city up-river and already on sale, could have provided Olly with the results. The *Courier's* own LATE SPORTS edition was a sufficiently adequate arbiter of fortune for the average investor.

The thin streak of mathematical talent in Mr. Pomphrey, however, demanded those qualities implicit in the decisive words, "final" and "extra." He required the complete and accurate tabulation of scores according to the various Leagues and their sub-divisions, the nicest treatment of goal averages and other recondite issues and, above all, the symbols for the winning combinations in the more important Pools.

As if expecting from the Press something with the authority of a major study in trigonometry, Olly required a good deal for his penny and paused not to think of telephone bells ringing all afternoon, typewriters clacking, the loud, continual shouts of "Boy!" and the nervous exhaustion that overtakes the sub-editors of evening newspapers every Saturday afternoon in winter. He was interested only in the private miracle, of which he might one day be the central figure. His waiting was anxious, even tense.

A sudden clamour along the street suddenly relieved that tension. He saw, rushing out of the narrow mouth of Glebe Lane into the main thoroughfare, the small, ragged but vociferous and active army of newsvending men and boys, each with a fat bundle of the green sheets under the arm. They moved violently, these distant automata, as if the immediate sale of all their copies of the *Courier* was as necessary as the putting out of a fire. The vendors ran, as it were slashing a copy of the paper into each outstretched hand, palming the proffered coin simultaneously and dropping it into a side pocket, even as the arm came across to select the next copy for sale.

His penny warm in his hand, Olly had the impatient feeling that an excessive number of people desired that night to buy copies of the *Courier's* definitely final edition. Dammit, the chap might be sold out before he reached the Linen Bank corner! Mr. Pomphrey therefore moved eastwards towards the leading vendor and jostled with several rough fellows in the scramble for news. The sheet firmly in his hand at last, his ascent of the cobbled steps of Thorn Lane to the peace of the residential levels was rapid.

On the verge of the wide expanse of Union Square Olly paused to study the *Courier's* Stop Press column and scan it for the vital two inches of type headed POOLS RESULTS.

The paper trembled with his excitement as he read the familiar list—Strang's, Vernon's, Littlewood's. His eye worked rapidly until it lighted, like that of a botanist on a rare plant long sought, on the legend "Pebbleworth's Victory Special," followed by the symbols 1X22XX12 and so on.

"Thought there would be a damned lot of draws and aways to-day," Olly confided to himself in a vehement mutter that considerably astonished Mrs. Wharrie, the dentist's wife, who was on her way down to the Pavilion to see, for the fourth time, *Lassie Come Home*. . . . "I just can't help loving the dear wee beasties," she would explain. . . . Olly then stepped off the pavement, the paper still outstretched before him, and, with a growing conviction that worked in his midriff like a stiff tot of brandy, began to believe that the results as tabulated in the *Courier* coincided with those in one of the several forms he had submitted on behalf of the household in No. 20 Stornoway Street, top left.

Half-way across the square he paused again in the bright, still sunlight of the April evening to study the symbols, this to the annoyance of a bus-driver fighting to swing his double decker in a close curve by the roundabout. The ill-tempered blast of the horn sent Olly skipping on to the narrow pavement of the refuge, but still he could not take his eyes away from that intoxicating line of type.

Pebbleworth's Victory Special—1X22XX12 and the rest. There it was in black and white, however incredibly so ; and, said Mr. Pomphrey to himself, we're on to something now unless I'm a Dutchman.

With that he folded the paper carefully and slipped the oblong into his coat pocket. As he walked westwards and then uphill, he moved briskly, humming and marching to the air of "The Boys of the Old Brigade," one of the few tunes he could confidently command. It lingered from a childish memory of his father entertaining the children and relations in a large Edwardian drawing-room long ago, in the days when a carriage and pair waited every morning to take Papa to business. So what about a Rolls whispering up to the door of a jolly nice house in the West End to take the last of the Pomphreys to The Club?

Olly was not, however, so confident in the prospect as a

less experienced investor might have been. He had seen the day when, thinking himself on to something pretty big, dozens of other people had been on to it as well, so that the dividend had been a miserable seven quid or so. He had not made a loss to the Pools ; he was in fact jolly well up on the chappies who ran them ; but he knew that to take real big money off them happened only occasionally to a chosen few among the hopeful millions.

However, he popped his head into the kitchen where Ness was preparing the evening meal.

"I say, Miss Nimmo. Sorry to interrupt, but I thought you'd like to know I think we're on to something pretty good in the Pools this week."

"Really ! Isn't that grand ? " But Ness spoke with little more than the feigned enthusiasm an aunt might bring to a boy's announcement that he had been chosen to play cricket for his school 2nd XI.

"Wouldn't count on it too much, of course," said Olly wisely. "I'm going up to check on my duplicates, and then I'll check again with the wireless. You can't be too careful with figures."

"I'm sure you can't," Ness agreed.

She proceeded to prepare a dish of macaroni with a cheese sauce, such as her Italian mother had thoroughly taught her to make, and then to lay the dining-room table, Kit being out at tennis. Hardly a flicker of excitement visited her mind even as the gods were piling up a host of problems for her. Mr. Pomphrey got so worked up, dear soul, when he thought he had won a pound or two ! So often he hadn't when he thought he had. All this business of buying the evening paper and then sitting with his ear to the wireless was just a real old wife's fussiness. Then life would slow down again on a lazy Sunday morning, and the wheels of custom would start turning once more.

When all the young folk were home again, however, and the family was grouped about the supper table with the paying guest, Ness responded to the delicate tremors of a tension in the general mood. Mr. Pomphrey had come down from his vigil with the portable set in his room and reported seriously to Quintin that, while he didn't want to make a fuss or any-

thing like that, he was now certain that one of his shots in the Pools had, as he phrased it, come home.

"And I may say, Miss Nimmo," he turned to his hostess, "it's one of your entries."

"Well, I wouldn't touch it!" snapped Ness with the unfortunate violence of those who are forced too often into the defensive.

"Why you should lose your temper over a mere hypothesis . . ." Quin began.

Ness was thinking how much she disliked his face alone: the rodent nose and the ineffective chin, when young Kit at once cleared and thickened the air with challenge.

"If you were suddenly to win, say, forty thousand pounds," she addressed the company at large, "what would you do?"

Duggie laughed: "If you're asking me, Kit, I'd beat it out of this dump round the world in the most expensive ship I could find. Or I'd buy a Dak for myself and fly all over the place. . . . What about you, Ness?"

"I think it's a silly question. How could one answer without thinking for a long time?"

"It may seem to you a silly question," Quin again poked his thin, moist nose into her privacy, "but even if it is wildly hypothetical, it's also amusing—and interesting, I think."

"Oh, if it's like that!" Ness blundered. "Let me see, now. Do you know—I'd like to buy a nice motor yacht and sail away somewhere."

"Escape motive at work," observed young Kit. "What about you, Mr. Pomphrey?"

"Hard to say, Kit, isn't it? I dunno, really, but I suppose I'd like a nice little house in the country—bit of shooting and fishing and all that. I shouldn't," he added with emphasis, "want to make a splash. Bit too old for that, I'm afraid."

Quintin summed up a symposium that interested him profoundly, but not before he had pressed Kit into admitting that she would like to sail round the world in liners of magnificence.

"Not one of you, except perhaps Mr. Pomphrey, is being honest," he declared. "When you are dealing with a big sum of money like forty thousand, it's no use saying you would use it to gratify the desire that happens to be in your mind at the

moment. It's perfectly natural, of course. I could say that I'd like to have a smart car, and so I should ; but I'd never dream of using my capital to pay for it. I'd make the capital work to earn the interest that would allow me to buy and run the car out of income."

"Put the ruddy money away in investments, and to blazes with a bit of fun?" groaned Duggie.

"Certainly," retorted Quin with nearly complete candour and some pain. "Money that comes by inheritance or through a windfall is not expendable. That's where the small punter always goes wrong. He spends on luxuries what he occasionally wins ; he forgets what he has consistently lost over a long period."

"And life, according to you," snapped Kit, "is to be all figures in a ledger and no fun at all."

"If you could have waited for the development of my argument, you would have perhaps dimly perceived, though I doubt it, that my thinking on the subject makes every reasonable allowance for what you are pleased to call fun."

"Aw, put a sock in it!" suggested Duggie wearily.

"I do think, Quin," Olly intervened, "that you are taking it a bit too seriously. The question was more of a joke, if you don't mind me suggesting it."

"I have learned that the right handling of money is much more than a joke."

"And—pardon me, Mr. Pomphrey," Kit chipped in, "my question wasn't a joke at all. I wanted to see how you would all react."

"So what, kid?" asked Duggie, his heavily-lashed eyes half-closing in malicious amusement.

"Just what I expected."

"A remarkable case of percipience on the part of a half-educated adolescent," said Quin.

"And the kid's got you on toast—and you can't take it," said Duggie with a sort of lazy relish. "And you never could."

Ness was unhappy. They were all so clever, so quarrelsome. She rose.

"Well, I think that's enough of that," she said, "if you don't mind, Mr. Pomphrey. You can start clearing away, Kit."

Duggie rose and said : " I'll do the chores to-night." The smear of the bruise about his right eye was still obtrusive.

" I take it," said Quintin, rising, " that you can hardly face the Legion Rooms after last night."

" And you can bloody well take that ! "

The first weapon that lay to Duggie's hand was only a shallow dish containing some rather thin rhubarb jam, but the stain of the stuff over Quin's long nose and nearly albino eyebrows was somehow more satisfactorily humiliating than a blow could have been. The victim rushed from the room.

" Duggie ! " cried Ness.

" Oh, I say ! " Olly remarked.

" He asked for it," growled Duggie, frowning darkly, but in shame. " Sorry, Mr. Pomphrey."

" Quin's clever," observed Kit, " but he's not clever enough to keep quiet about it."

" I'm sorry, Mr. Pomphrey," Ness turned in distress to her paying guest. " I apologise. I'm afraid we don't behave very well sometimes."

Olly rose from his place and bowed.

" Don't mention it, my dear lady. Little things like that are bound to happen. I must say I did think Quintin was laying it on a bit thick. Got to keep personalities out of it, haven't we ? In any case," he concluded rather grandly, " the drill is to wire our claim to Pebbleworth's first thing on Monday morning. I'm pretty sure we're on to a good thing this time."

2

In all the years of life that lay before her Ness could never completely recapture the enchanting, frightening, lunatic atmosphere of existence during the week following that exchange of hatred and vulgarity in the top flat, left, of No. 20 Stornoway Street. Again and again in middle-age and old age she rehearsed the events in close detail, and still the essence of the mad period would elude her, just as the high-lighted rapture of honeymoon is beyond recapture by the most devoted of middle-aged spouses.

It began on the Wednesday forenoon when she answered a burly and undistinguished-looking man's ring at the door-bell. She was busy with a suit for wee Johnnie Cumming up the road and had quite a nice bit of meat pot-roasting on the gas, and she was annoyed at being disturbed.

"I'm from Pebbleworth's Pools," the man said in a curiously flat voice. He seemed to be an Englishman from Lancashire. "I'd like to have a word with Miss Agnes Nimmo, if I may."

"It's Agnessa, really. But it's Mr. Pomphrey you want to see."

"Never 'eard of 'im," said the emissary. "Miss Agnes Nimmo it says 'ere. It's pretty good news just the same."

Ness heard the flap of the McJannets' letter-box being raised ever so cautiously.

"Perhaps you'll come in, then, Mr. . . . ?"

"Grobble's the name. Bit unusual, I'm sure. G-R-O-double B-L-E. Grobble. Comes from Norfolk or one of those places, they say."

"In here, Mr. Grobble. Take a seat, will you? I'll get Mr. Pomphrey."

"Yes, but you're this Miss Nimmo : is that right ?"

"Quite right, but it's a bit complicated. Excuse me."

She did not call up the stairs. She raced up them and burst in on Olly where he sat reading the *Glasgow Herald* in the bay of her attic workroom window.

"That's a man from the Pools," she gasped. "He says he wants to see me."

She seemed as distracted and feckless as a girl who has surprisingly received a Royal Command to a Garden Party. Olly rose from his chair with some grandeur.

"Ah !" he exclaimed. "I thought we were on to a pretty good thing. Where's this fellow ?"

Ness led Olly into the dining-room, where Mr. Grobble sat by the bare mahogany table, his nails clicking on its polished surface.

"This is Mr. Pomphrey, Mr. Grobble," she said, thinking what a silly concatenation of sounds was formed by surnames. "He'll know all about your business."

"All very well," complained the man from the Pools.

“Pleased to meet Mr. Pompey, I’m sure, but my business is with Miss Agnes Nimmo.”

“Agnessa, if you don’t mind, Mr. Grobble. And it is Pomphrey, not Pompey.” Olly was at his gentlemanly best in this moment. “The fact is that I fill in the coupons for the family here. A sort of hobby, you understand. Miss Nimmo naturally wants my advice. And now?”

“And now,” said Mr. Grobble with his own grandeur, “I’m happy to state that Miss Nimmo has scooped the pool in last week’s Victory Special and wins forty-two thousand, three hundred and fifty-three pounds, seventeen and fourpence. So what?”

“Good God!” gasped Olly, for once shocked out of his gentlemanly poise.

“What!” Ness almost screamed.

Mr. Grobble grinned and repeated: “Forty-two thousand, three hundred and fifty-three pounds, seventeen and fourpence. That’s fair enough, ain’t it?”

A sudden sense of fear came upon Ness then. It was too much, if it was true; the responsibility was beyond her. She saw also the forewarning shadows of delicate conflict with Olly. The latter, however, was quick to recover his grasp on the situation. He walked to the window, flicking his moustache, stood there for a moment staring down at a delivery van on the roadway far below, then turned and faced Mr. Grobble in a businesslike way.

“Well, that’s very satisfactory, Mr. Grobble, and thank you for calling. I suppose a cheque will come through in due course.”

Mr. Grobble stared at this master of nonchalance.

“I’ll say you can take it, both of you!” he remarked with some admiration. “I’ve seen me ’ugged and kissed for a couple of ’undred quid. But the cheque, now. See, that’s chiefly what I’ve come about. ’Eadquarters would like if Miss Nimmo would come to Blackpool and receive her presentation in The Tower or one of them places. Slap-up show, the Mayor and all; all expenses found, of course. It ’elps with the publicity, see?”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort,” rapped Ness with an intensity of venom which visibly shocked the representative of the Pools.

"Aw, say!" he pleaded.

"No, no!" Olly supported his hostess. "That's just a bit too much like exploitation. You can hardly expect Miss Nimmo to appear in a strange place before a strange crowd. Now, if you were to suggest a little ceremony here in Garvel, among our own people, people who would be interested . . . well, I think it might be considered."

"A pity," sighed Mr. Grobble, rising. "The bosses won't be 'alf disappointed. Still, if I can fix up a cinema here and get the Provost . . ."

When Olly had shown him out and returned to the dining-room, Ness was waiting. She stood by the table, shaking a little, but determined in her mind.

"You understand, of course, Mr. Pomphrey," she said, "that I cannot touch a penny of this money."

Olly smiled with a confidential charm that was to be one of the sweetest of her memories all her life.

"And you will understand, Miss Nimmo," he said, "that I shall most certainly not touch a penny of it either. So shall we give it away?"

"We might do worse," said Ness unhappily, and Olly smiled wonderfully again.

"Really, Miss Nimmo, the thing is quite simple," he patiently explained. "It was your entry that won the prize. You have handed me a shilling every week during the season to invest for you, and I have had the fun of filling up the forms for you. So now, legally, morally and in any other way you jolly well like, the prize is yours."

"It's not that," Ness faltered.

"I am extremely happy for your sake," he persisted. "This is going to give you leisure, happiness. Please let me put it quite bluntly, Miss Nimmo. You will probably spend some money on the house; you may buy another house. Life will be more comfortable all round. So, as your paying guest—if . . ." Olly bowed slightly ". . . if you will be good enough to have me—I shall look forward to enjoying my share of the fun in a quiet way. That will be a more than ample reward for any little service I have been able to do."

Ness wanted to rush forward and kiss the man. In a flash she had perceived the verity behind the gentlemanly poses, the

stylised phrases. The facts of kindness and dignity were overwhelming.

"Oh, I'll have to think!" she cried and hurried from the room, at the same moment absurdly thinking of her pot-roast.

She was crying now, and she cried the more loudly when Duggie rose lazily from the basket chair before the fire, asking:

"What's the big news? It was a damned good job I was here to look after your roast."

And when she had blubbered out her story, she was in his arms, being hugged and petted and anon waltzed round the kitchen by a bad young man with a black eye. So much kindness! And, ah! the comfort of Duggie's physical strength and affection about her. It was the same when young Kit came home from school, her little pose of cynicism forgotten under the impact of the news. It seemed to Ness that the girl flew at her in a fury; the strong young arms about her neck hurt her.

"Oh, Ness, Ness! Lovely, lovely! You with nothing more to worry about! I'm so happy. And, Ness dear, we all love you so much!"

Washing up after lunch, still trembling and bewildered, Ness thought on the queer influence of the Italian blood in her own people. But Olly was not in any degree a southern type, and Quin was utterly different. What a confusing business was the ordinary life. And what a blessing Quin lunched out! She would have at least a little time to think before he came home in the evening.

An air compounded of the festive and the incredible hung over the supper table. Mr. Pomphrey and Duggie had been separately and simultaneously visited by an appropriate idea, and two bottles of champagne stood by Ness's place when she carried in the scrambled eggs. (Olly's offering had been acquired through the National Club in an orderly fashion; Duggie's had been, as he phrased it, chiselled out of old Broadfoot the licensed grocer on Ness's credit.) They were all very gay, with Olly proposing a toast in charmingly conventional phrases, and everybody laughing a great deal. Ness laughed with them as happy as any, but at the back of her mind lay the question almost all adults must ask at the very climax of celebration.

Inevitably, it was Quin who raised the frightening issue, so full of explosive possibilities. He raised a hand against Olly's offer of the last of the second bottle of champagne, pushed his chair back from the table and, much in the manner of an experienced chairman, asked :

"And now, how are we going to arrange to handle all this money?"

"We!" cried Duggie, as if he had long awaited this moment. "What the devil has it got to do with you?"

Quin looked along his nose and across the table at his brother, contempt and patronage in his glance.

"That literal mind of yours, Duggie, is a bore," he said. "Am I stealing Ness's fortune if I accidentally use the pronoun 'we'? I should have thought Ness needs, probably wants, a good deal of advice and help—from those of us who are competent to give it. That's all I thought of suggesting."

"Well, don't try and turn it into a ruddy board meeting," growled Duggie. "The money belongs to Ness, and she's perfectly fit to look after it herself."

This thrust, though crude, was shrewder in effect than Quin could relish. He was almost relieved when the butt of Ness's knife knocked peremptorily on the table.

"Listen!" their sister commanded harshly. "I'm tired of hearing you two squabbling. You can't even keep your tempers and mind your manners on a special occasion like this, when we might all be happy and friendly. I apologise again, Mr. Pomphrey. But there needn't be any argument. I have quite made up my mind what's to be done with the money, if it's legally mine."

"There can be no doubt about that," said Quin keenly. "But before you go any further, Ness . . . I refuse to be misunderstood," he insisted with a glance at Duggie. ". . . Let me tell you that my advice, my legal advice, is that you form a sort of Trust in the shape of a limited liability company. It could be, for instance, an investment and property trust. So long as the monies are handled for earning. I could draft a scheme in half an hour."

Duggie's chair, pushed far back from the table, was tilted at a dangerous angle to the floor; the cigarette in his mouth pointed to the ceiling.

"Secretary's honorarium, two-fifty a year. Legal advice, *ad lib.*, and Bob's your uncle," Duggie confided to the ceiling. "Don't listen to that guy, Ness. He bites."

"I am listening to none of you," Ness said coldly. "If you will listen to me for a moment . . . There are five of us—Mr. Pomphrey, you two boys, Kit and myself. Five into forty-two goes eight and something. Now, you needn't argue about it. I'm going to hand each person his or her share, and I don't want to hear any more about it. What you do with it will be none of my business. Naturally, I'll look after Kit's share till she needs it."

Quin looked puzzled for a while, and Ness could see his face reflect the rapidity and anxiety of his calculations. Duggie's chair returned to the horizontal with a bump.

"Eight thousand quid! Me! You keep it under the pillow, Ness."

"I will only take what will see me through the University," asserted Kit with vehemence.

"And I think your scheme breaks down, Miss Nimmo," Olly intervened at length, "simply because, as I explained this morning, I cannot possibly touch a penny of the money."

They all turned to look at him, but Mr. Pomphrey was firm in his righteousness, calmly rolling a cigarette. Only Duggie said anything, and that was a curt "Attaboy!"

"The money belongs to you, Miss Nimmo," Olly went on serenely. "All this stuff about Trusts and shares seems to me beside the point. The capital is yours to manage as you see fit and, with all respect to you, Quin, I can't think it could be in better hands."

The struggle within the soul of Quintin Macneur Nimmo was betrayed by his keen looks towards this surprising paying guest, by his subsequent and morose contemplation of the silver vase in the middle of the table and, finally, by his abrupt rising.

"Nothing has been settled that I can see," he said. "You come into a small fortune and then won't take the most obvious steps to develop it, let alone protect it. However, we've all got time to think about it. At least, I hope so. I'm going out now."

Duggie rose slowly, smiling down on his sisters.

"And now that we've had the gen from the Solicitor-General, I think I'll go out, too."

"And I've got prep., money or no money," Kit said. "The whole thing's just a nuisance, really."

Ness rose to clear away, but Olly lingered.

"I say, Miss Nimmo," he began awkwardly, "may I offer you a bit of advice?"

"There's nothing I need more."

"Exactly. So what I suggest is that you go straight tomorrow and put the whole business into the hands of one of the big, old firms of solicitors—Mills, Maclaren & Gordon or somebody like that. I rather think, if you don't mind me saying so, that what you need at this stage is some completely—how shall I put it?—disinterested advice. These lawyer chappies know all the tips."

"I think that's exactly what I will do," said Ness gravely. "Thank you, Mr. Pomphrey. But it's what Kit said, the whole thing's a confounded nuisance."

"Wouldn't say that!" protested Olly with spirit. "Not by a very long chalk. Forty thousand quid is forty thousand quid."

3

Nuisance was not the word. The thing developed at the pace of a galloping consumption into a plague, an affliction, a curse. Ness had never paused to reflect on the speed and voracity with which the human race will batten on news of money and pass it on, so that, as it seemed before she got to bed that night, her name must be a household word all over the town. She thought of the vanmen carrying it next morning to the remotest sheep farm in the hinterland.

The procession of callers was headed by the Misses McJannet who, for the journey of some five yards across the top landing, had arrayed themselves in their best clothes of occasion, including their Sunday hats. The ring was answered by Kit, and Ness was thankful for her sister's clarity of mind and firmness of purpose. From the kitchen sink she heard the first exchanges and apprehended at once the new danger that

threatened. Deliberately holding the plate she was drying in one hand and her drying-cloth in the other, Ness came up behind Kit, who was parleying through a two-foot space, her body filling the threatened point of entry.

"I'm afraid we're just going out, Miss McJannet," the girl was lying blandly.

"That's right, Miss McJannet," added Ness over Kit's shoulder. She found she also could lie cheerfully, even happily. "I'm sorry we can't ask you in, but we're late as it is."

"It was your wonderful bit of luck," cackled Miss Robina McJannet, the younger. The elder, Miss Floss, was a thought unstable in the mind and given to tittering merely. Their gold-rimmed spectacles glinted with excitement. "It's lovely, isn't it? So wonderful! You must be pleased. We wanted to be the first to congratulate you."

"Thank you very much, Miss McJannet," said Ness coolly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I simply must fly. Good-night, Miss McJannet!"

"I suppose you must be busy," Miss Robina faltered.

The black sisters were suddenly pathetic in defeat, and Ness would perhaps have relented. But Kit said pleasantly:

"It was nice of you to call, Miss McJannet," and closed the door.

Ness and Kit returned to the kitchen.

"So you see what's going to happen now?" Ness asked. "It's awful!"

"You can at least thank God that we haven't a telephone," said Kit dryly. "But that's the Misses McJannet put well and truly in their place."

"Yes," agreed Ness, but she was not happy in doing so.

There it was. She could not bear even to think unkindly of other people, and now she was rejoicing in the rebuff of these two poor old creatures across the landing. She could even enjoy her new ability to defy and despise them. It was just what Kit had been saying about Quin the other evening; money was power, and the sense of power was a sore temptation.

The bell rang again.

This time it was Maisie Philip, the chiropodist round the corner. She was a fat, flustered, early-thirtyish woman, wholly

innocent of evil. Ness smiled to hear her breathless assault upon Kit from the landing.

"Oh, I've just heard the news, Kit! Oh, it's wonderful, it's marvellous! Oh, it's such a lovely thing it's happened to Ness! Oh, I wish it would happen to me, but nothing happens to me! I'm too fat and silly, I suppose. Tell me, Kit, is it true? I just wanted to know, and then I'll run away and tell Mamma. She's dying to know. Oh dear, what a life!"

Ness had come up behind Kit again and spoke blithely over the stern young shoulder. Maisie was one of the innocents of life: a blundering, stupid, kind fool who lived only with and for her bedridden parent, Mamma.

"It's true enough, Maisie, and I'm going to be driven mad before we're finished. In fact, Kit and I are rushing out to get away from it all. How's Mamma?"

"Wonderful, Ness. I'll just run away back and tell her. She'll talk of nothing else for the next fortnight; she'll be that pleased. And, oh, Ness, I'm terribly pleased it's you! Fancy if it had been one of those!" She jerked a finger over her shoulder towards the door of the Misses McJannet, little knowing that the eyes of Miss Robina had her inimicably in view through the slit of the letter-box. "But there I go! Ta-ta, Ness! Ta-ta, Kit! I wish I was you, but I'm too fat and silly. I'll tell Mamma."

Still laughing over the breathless excesses of poor Maisie, the Nimmo sisters looked at each other and the laughter passed from their faces.

"But is this to go on all night?" Ness asked.

"Yes, and to-morrow and the next day and the next, until they have all had a part in the play."

"But I can't stand it, Kit. I'll go mad. I hate to get angry with people, but all these prying and poking noses! If they were people who visited regularly . . ."

"I'm telling you, Ness. The poor dears just want to play a part in the drama. It doesn't often come their way, you know."

"Drat this money!" cried Ness. "I wish I had never heard of it."

"Well, we can stop them for to-night anyhow," said Kit.

She tore out the lid of an old shoe box for a placard, and with brush and Chinese ink inscribed on it the legend:

NOT AT HOME

A drawing-pin through the cardboard and into the varnished front door seemed to the girls to seal the flat against unlawful entry.

"That'll shoo them away," said Kit confidently. "Now I simply must go and get on with my work."

"I wish the men had stayed at home," remarked Ness unhappily.

Kit's knowledge of the workings of the adult mind in relation to money easily gained was imperfect. All the hunger the thought of it can inspire ; the private agonies and obscure diseases and secret passions it is believed, magically, to allay ; the dream of escape it seems to offer, as alluring to baffled human beings as a hunk of carrion meat to a starved mongrel ; the appetites it may splendidly and with adorable wickedness appear to satisfy—this much was beyond the understanding of even an unusually intelligent girl of eighteen.

Maisie Philip was not twenty minutes gone when the bell rang again.

Kit looked up from a donnish introduction to *Twelfth Night*. Could the fool not read her notice on the door ? Olly and Quin and Duggie all had their latchkeys, even if Duggie was not always to be trusted with his. It might be somebody quite importantly connected with the Pools. Or Ness might run, the silly slave of long habit as she was, to answer the ring. Kit hesitated and finally submitted to the temptation of curiosity.

It was Mr. Titheridge, the Congregational minister from the main door flat, left, and the unexpectedness of his appearance had Kit staring dumbly. This innocent man, happy in a secure belief in the privilege of his calling, had prepared himself for an arch approach to the lady whom fortune had so signally favoured. He had thought of a little teasing about the naughtiness of gambling, a graver exordium on the roots of evil, and finally a discreet hint as to the claims of his connection to a share of such expressions of gratitude in cash as, he felt sure, Miss Nimmo would now feel called upon to make. He had felt, strongly, that he was cast for a prominent part in the local drama.

"Ah, little Miss Nimmo!" he fatally began. "But it is your big sister I should like to see."

"She's not at home, Mr. Titheridge," said Kit stolidly, gesturing towards her placard.

"Now, now! I know all about these conventions. Sometimes I have to use them myself."

"But it's true. My sister can't see anybody. In fact, she's in bed."

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Titheridge, faintly shocked by the indelicacy of the situation suggested and profoundly cast down by the rebuff. "In that case . . ."

He raised his flat hat and vanished, an angry man. Ness was waiting for Kit in the dark of the lobby.

"This is turning me into a first-class liar," the young girl complained ruefully. "You're in bed now, you know, Ness."

"I heard you. But what does that cheeky devil mean by coming up here and ringing in spite of the notice? He's never looked our way before."

"The popular Misses Nimmo," Kit chanted sourly. "Renowned for their beauty and charm. . . . Oh, to hell with all this, Ness! Let them ring. I'm going to swot."

"And I'm going up to the sewing-room to see what work I've still to do. I suppose I won't need to do any more sweated labour in that line."

"I'm glad to hear it."

There could, however, be neither order nor calm on such a night. Kit, trying to concentrate on her books at the kitchen table, could hear the feet of strangers occasionally arrive at the top landing, shuffle uneasily and fade away, their owners accepting the curt sense of her placard. The bell rang three times more, one of these unseen visitants ringing and ringing and then rapping loudly on the painted glass of the front door; and Kit never knew that she had baffled an ambitious young reporter from the *Courier* and his somewhat dingy companion, a free-lance Press photographer. At length, breaking away from Bodmer on *Language*, Kit slipped into the dining-room and called Ness down from the attic to share her wonder at what she saw from behind the curtains.

Decent people in the tenements opposite were also behind their curtains, peering across the gulf towards the flat that

had been entered by the Big Money. Family parties and young couples, making uphill to the walk round The Craigs, would pause on the opposite pavement and stare up at the elevated walls, windows and roofs that now enclosed a legend.

"They're mad," said Ness, starting to giggle.

"We're all mad;" agreed Kit.

The absurdity of their situation came on the sisters like a blast of laughing gas. Ness's giggle was the last thing. They laughed till tears were streaming, till they were clutching each other in wild delight and dancing round the table, as if in some ritual defiance of the forces that now so closely threatened to invade their privacy.

The mild outbreak of hysteria between the sisters was checked in good time by the inordinately early return of Duggie. Forbidden the Legion Rooms for the time being at least, and too short of cash to enjoy the freedom of his other resorts, Duggie's night out had been dull in his estimate.

"The next time you're going to win a big prize in the Pools, Ness," he said, "please give me notice beforehand, and I'll be well out of this dump before the Nosey Parkers get going."

"Oh, I know what you mean! Ask Kit. We've had it here: the bell ringing and all sorts of characters on the doorstep. But listen, Dug," Ness added gravely, wiping the tears of recent laughter from her eyes. "Will you do something for me. . . ?"

She looked round the dingy dining-room, but Kit had gone back to the kitchen to sort out her books for to-morrow.

"Sure, Ness! What is it? Running off Miss Carmichael's bloomers on the sewing-machine? That's a pushover."

"Don't be silly, Dug!" Ness started to laugh again. "No, seriously. Do you think you could manage lunch and supper to-morrow for Mr. Pomphrey and yourself? Kit can have lunch at school."

"Escoffier's the name." The dark face was at once quizzical and kind. "Going places?"

"Dug, I've got to get out of here or go crazy. But listen, dear—could you be a darling and stay about the house as

much as you can? We're simply invaded. Kit gets no peace to do her work. It needs a man to deal with all those cheeky people."

"Leave it to me, Ness. This," he added wryly, pointing to the dark smear of contusion about his right eye, "this'll scare them off. I'll be your chucker-out, and don't worry. I've got some experience, you know."

He spoke gently, but Ness's ear caught the wry overtones of his mysterious self-condemnation.

"And that's another thing, Duggie," she said. "I hope—I think"—she faltered—"this money will help us to—to find—to find something—something for you—where you will be happy, busy. I wish you would take your share and do what you wish with it."

In the half-darkness she was acutely aware of the solid, large, kindly mass of masculinity near her. She could discern his slow smile, the expression of his wary consideration for her anxiety.

"I shouldn't worry too much about me, Ness," she heard him say quietly. "I'm still expendable. Is there anything else?"

"Oh, yes; I forgot. Would you be a good lad and run out early to Driver's. I'd like a taxi to be here at ten. But wait till Quin's away to the office."

"So the lass is going places indeed?" The strong arm came round her shoulder, and the dark laugh sounded in her ear. "What about brewing up a cup of char now, instead of you and me being so ruddy dramatic?"

Olly and Quin were soon home. They were of one mind as to the consequences of Ness's windfall. They almost made her feel guilty.

"I simply had to leave the Club an hour before my usual time," Olly complained wistfully. "All sorts of dashed outsiders buttonholing me, let alone the decent fellows chaffing me until I was pretty sick, I can tell you."

"My night," added Quin, as if any night in his existence must somehow possess just that little extra shade of unique importance, "was ruined. I had a most important bit of business—quite a big transaction to discuss, though I say it myself—and I finally had to apologise to my client and take

him up to a private room in Blackwood's. People with no business to approach me at any time."

Ness glanced hastily at Duggie and was relieved to see that he had for once no comment to offer but lay instead in one of his attitudes of sleepy indifference, his chair tilted far back, his half-closed eyes on the ceiling.

"And how long," she asked, "is this to go on? Have I really got to make a fool of myself with this public presentation?"

"If you ask me," said Olly with a surprising flash of shrewdness, "the public presentation of the cheque will be about the end of it. Once people *see* the cheque handed over, or read reports of the affair, they'll know that that's jolly well that, and they'll turn to the next thing. All this excitement just now is because they can't quite believe it—and it might have happened to them."

"That's absolutely right," Quin agreed. "I was thinking of it as I was walking up the road. It hadn't occurred to me before, strangely enough."

"Passing strange," murmured Duggie to the ceiling. But Quin was not to be baited.

"It's quite obvious," he continued, "that there's going to be a procession of people at the door, but on the top of that there's going to be a shoal of begging letters."

Duggie's chair returned to the horizontal with a thud.

"Leave the door to me," he said. "I'm going to stay in the next few days and throw the snoopers out on their necks. Tyler of the Lodge, that's me."

"That's fine, Duggie!" agreed Quin with unusual warmth. "If you can manage that, I'll slip out early to-morrow and get Wilkie the printer to run off a form . . . 'Miss Nimmo regrets . . . '—that sort of thing. We can all help to address envelopes in the evening. No—I'll get it printed on postcards. Saves money."

"Burn their confounded begging letters, if you ask me," Olly intervened.

"No, Mr. Pomphrey," Quin demurred, thinking of contacts and his nose twitching. "There are bound to be some that we don't want to ignore. We'll have a good many real letters to write. Of course, I'll deal with that sort of thing through the office."

The doorbell rang, and Duggie heaved himself off his chair, a hopeful grin on his face.

"Now, don't be rude," Ness cautioned him as he strode into the lobby.

Those assembled in the kitchen could hear only a rumbling of male voices. There was also some loud laughter. Duggie returned, grinning.

"Two or three drunks just thrown out of Blackwood's," he explained. "They only wanted to shake hands with Ness. Nice blokes."

Kit laughed, and Quin looked displeased.

"Blundering fools!" he sniffed. "There's no chance of a quiet discussion at this rate."

"Of what?" asked Duggie, his fingers trembling towards the trigger, as it were.

"Obviously, of the right way to manage this money."

"I think we'll leave it just now," Ness intervened. "I want to think about that. In fact, I'm going away all day to-morrow by myself."

She saw Olly raise his eyebrows and smile slightly. She also took in Quintin's frown as he asked sharply:

"Where?"

"Ah, that's my secret! Come along now, Kit, and get to bed. We can't sit up here all night."

Duggie, his chair again tilted back at a dangerous angle, watched his brother's face through eyes nearly but not quite closed and lazily enjoyed the subtle expression of puzzlement and concern confessed by the long nose, the thin lips and the receding chin.

4

It seemed next morning that there was still no way of escape, in spite of the handsome hired car Duggie had ordered for her. The driver, in the manner common enough among members of his craft, winked and nodded his head sideways as Ness hurried out of the close.

"Into the big money, eh, Miss?" he remarked, smiling. "Wish I could have a bit of your luck."

Ness could see out of the corners of her eyes that there were female heads at many of the windows about and above her. Mob-capped women, sweeping front-door steps up and down the street, paused to turn from their brooms and stare. She could almost hear them saying : “ Where’s she away to now ? ” She did not think of those spectators unkindly. It was just the difficulty of defending your own privacy, of decently escaping the notoriety the world insisted on putting upon you.

Then she encountered Mr. Gordon of Mills, Maclaren & Gordon, Solicitors and Notaries Public, only to learn that, in this aged gentleman’s opinion, her embarrassing fortune was of no great account after all. She did not realise that Mr. Cosmo Riach Gordon looked to be approached by letter for an appointment ; that he had that morning travelled forty miles by car from his country home in another county, only to discover that none of his junior partners was on duty ; nor that, on being told by a clerk that a lady wanted to see him — “ This Miss Nimmo who has won forty thousand in the Pools ” — he had snapped : “ Oh, I suppose you’d better show the bloody woman in.”

On her own part, Ness had innocently imagined that the Mr. Gordon at the end of the firm’s name must be a junior — a quiet, good-looking man in early middle-age, say, with a wise and reassuring manner. She was therefore all the more taken aback to be led into the presence of a tall, aged person who looked as if he had ridden to hounds in the early morning. He wore a long riding jacket in Border check, a double-breasted waistcoat of corded fawn cloth, and tight trousers that barely overlapped the uppers of tan boots. The lips in a veined face were wet and spatulate, the eyes red-rimmed, and one of them, the left, rheumy and extruded in quite a hideous degree.

“ And you have won forty thousand pounds in one of those confounded gambling affairs ? ” he croaked after Ness had modestly stated her case. Mr. Gordon’s voice matched his appearance in suggesting that he had exhausted it in the excitements of an early morning chase. “ And you seek advice as to how to deal with it in your given circumstances ? Very well ! ”

The solicitor was then overtaken by a fit of deep-seated coughing that wetted and reddened his eyes and ended with a frank spit into a large blue silk handkerchief.

"Forty years ago, ma'am," he now wheezed, "I would have advised you to buy property or take out bonds on property that would have returned you at least four per cent. With income-tax at a negligible rate, you would thus be a well-to-do young lady. *Now*, your forty thousand will, with any degree of safety, return a gross income of one thousand pounds, and tax for a single woman will reduce that to about six hundred at the most. Twelve pounds a week, Miss Nimmo: that's what your fortune provides. You can thank your precious Labour Government for that!"

The old man seemed to suggest that the return of Socialism to power in Great Britain was wholly Ness's doing, and a very bad job at that.

"But I have still the money in the bank," Ness rallied.

"Good enough!" the solicitor applauded the stroke. "You have forty thousand to fall back on. I'm only telling you what you will have to live on. If you think of dividing up your capital as you explained to me, then you have so much less per week for subsistence. I wish you ladies could grasp the difference between capital and the interest thereon."

"I see," Ness hesitated, then flared out at her adviser. "Twelve pounds a week is a lot of money to people in my position, Mr. Gordon."

She had decided that she disliked this coarse, indifferent old man. Lawyers were all the same. Quin kept harping on capital and interest and all that. She was touched, however, when she rose to go out, that the old man tottered to open the door for her, and tapped her shoulder with his swollen fingers, and panted under the stress of even this small physical effort.

"It's a queer thing is money, Miss Nimmo, especially in these days. It's sometimes too easily come by, too difficult to put to good use. Now, think over those private problems of yours, like a good lass, and come back to us when your mind is made up. We'll be able to help you, I've no doubt at all."

The hired car swept her down to the King's Pier, easing smoothly at the very end of the gangway of the cross-river ferry, as if she were Royalty. Ness enjoyed the moment. It

was nearly miraculous that a bit of extra money could command so much convenience. She found herself tipping the driver at a rate which, only two days before, she would have thought ruinously extravagant. Indeed, she tried in vain to relate the value of a florin to an annual income of six hundred pounds.

The steamboat, with its red, white and black funnel, heaved easily against the pier in the wash of a passing hopper-barge as she went on board ; and Ness remembered excursions by the river steamers with her father, Wee Captain Slocum. She felt herself a truant girl : like a child escaped from a Foundling Hospital or something like that. It would be a wonderful moment when the captain climbed up to the bridge and the engines were given the warning bells ; when the gangway was drawn back to the quay and the gong of the telegraph clanged for speed ahead, the water beginning to churn into sour milk' under the beat of the paddles.

Her genial taxi-driver saw to it, however, that she was to have no privacy as yet. She observed him whispering to the purser at the gangway and pointing her way ; the purser's head slewed round abruptly. After that she had to meet searching glances and ingratiating smiles all round. When she went below decks in embarrassment the engineer behind his gleaming crank-shafts took his eye from the gauges and would have turned to speak to her had she not fled. The girl in the little tearoom off the cabin, to which she next sought to escape hopefully, greeted her cheerfully as " Miss Nimmo." As the vessel approached the pier on the other side of the Firth even the captain on the bridge turned to see her waiting by the sponson to disembark and saluted her gravely.

They were nice, all these people ; their curiosity was natural and disinterested ; but Ness longed to be able to ask them if they thought it was fun to be a public figure, and if they realised that the interest on forty thousand pounds, less tax, amounted to about twelve pounds a week.

She got ashore at length and stepped on to that marvellous province she had seen across four miles of salt water most days of her life and yet had never penetrated before. She might have been landing at Naples or New York. She had been on steamer trips with Wee Captain Slocum that touched at the

pier, but it was quite a different thing to walk off the boat and have the freedom of this foreign country.

For a time Ness was fearful that the gossip of the steamboat, relayed from Garvel, must follow and overtake her, like a forest fire. But the piermaster accepted her twopence for pier dues and, reassuringly, looked as if he disliked her. She hurried before the other few passengers down the long spine of the jetty and walked briskly across the tarmac of a municipal car park towards the junction of a busy side street with the promenade. She was like an escaped prisoner who makes for the crowded places.

She began to chuckle at her own situation and to wish that she had given Kit a day off school and brought her with her. They would have both been in the giggles by now. It was so ludicrous that the favourite of fortune should feel herself a creature hunted and haunted ; that Ness Nimmo, the sempstress, should now be going to earth like some naughty sprig of aristocracy using the historical device of the *incognito*. She became sure, as she walked the unfamiliar streets, that her identity had been left behind when she had crossed the gangway of the ferry steamer, and a crazy sort of happiness overcame her. She thought how funny it would be to stop this fat man waddling down the street (a veterinary surgeon, if she had only known) and say : " Excuse me, sir, but you have probably read about me in the papers. I am the Miss Agnessa Nimmo from Garvel who has just won forty-two thousand in the Pools." She also thought how funny it would be to see him looking about for a policeman.

Gradually, however, the dynamic of strangeness worked upon her. She was female, and shops were for her windows upon life. Like many another woman before her, Ness fell into the illusion that the shops of this strange, small town were ever so much more interesting and more variously stocked than those of her own much larger town. The sense of her special isolation dropped from her. She had a nice lunch with kidneys *sautés* in the restaurant above a baker's shop. Then, calmly and happily killing time, being merely content in her alienation from Garvel, she sauntered westwards along broad streets that were beautifully lined on both sides with flowering trees.

Already these cherries and thorns were breaking into froths of bridal whites and pinks and passionate reds. The houses stood back from the quiet roads behind hedges of golden privet and beech : every one stone-built, blue-slatted ; every garden before them alive with daffodils and trimmed for summer bloom. Hereabouts, somewhere, was the whitewashed house she had looked to across the water for years and coveted, and Ness trembled to think that its possession was now within her power. But there was so much to decide before then !

A vague unhappiness returned with the thought. She came to a bench and sat down to think, and though a tabby kitten jumped up beside her and mewed for her attention, Ness could not be quite distracted from the problems that seemed to her so grave and difficult.

It was Quin. The cases of Duggie and Olly would sort themselves out somehow. But how to decide as between Quin's clear claim to have the handling of her affairs and her distrust of him. It was not as if the brusqueness of Mr. Gordon had by any means reassured her.

The worry, a dull sort of toothache, dwelt with her as she walked down to the sea front and eastwards again towards the shops. A cup of tea in a café killed time but not anxiety, and there were still two hours before the last boat would come in to take her home across the water. She was driven at length into a shabby little cinema and saw, indifferently projected, a picture she had seen before. Again how curious it was that she must be the prisoner of her own fortune, a fugitive from the security within her grasp !

It was coming towards dusk as she passed from the boat on to the familiar territory of the King's Pier, and now she had a plan to escape notice. This took her, had she known it, at a comic little middle-ageing run towards the station steps and along the windy stretches of the least frequented platform. Down through the white-tiled subway, and then she had only a diagonal burst across the main road to reach the quiet of Pitt Street, even if she must brave the glances of a long queue of people waiting to see "Late Night in Havana" in the Rialto Cinema at the corner. They were indifferent to her passing, however. The shock came on her in the relative quietness round the corner.

Her name in tall red letters shouted at her from a series of posters along the eastern gable of the picture house. She learned for the first time that, at 9 p.m. on Saturday evening, she was within the Rialto to receive a cheque for £42,353 17s. 4d. at the hands of Provost Colquhoun. In blue letters considerably larger than those that screamed her name in red it was intimated that PEBBLEWORTH'S POOLS were the patrons of the affair. Mr. Grobble had been busy. And oh, when would this brutal assault on her privacy ease off?

Ness stormed into the kitchen of No. 20 Stornoway Street, top left.

"Have you seen these posters on the Rialto?" she cried.

"They're all over the town, if you want to know," said Quin in one of his most unpleasant tones, looking up from scattered heaps of letters about him on the deal table. "We've got our share of it here."

"But it's an outrage! I won't have anything to do with it. They can keep their cheque and their Provost and their Pools. I'm not going. I should have been consulted first."

"You were. We have been through all that."

She saw that Quin had been working hard and methodically on her account, and she paused to consider sourly the volume of correspondence her luck had inspired. Lounging deep in the basket-chair, Duggie completed her distraction.

"It was one whale of a day in this house, I can tell you!" he chuckled. "Bell ringing every ten minutes, and all sorts of shysters wanting to shake your hand, Ness. And it's *my* picture, not yours, that's going to be in the papers to-morrow, by the way. Ex-Commando Nimmo, hero of Monte Cassino. My story went down so big with the newspaper boys that they almost forgot you."

"Well, they can keep their cameras out of here when I'm at home."

"Oh, they'll get you with their flash-bulbs on Saturday night."

"Damn Saturday night!" said Ness violently, adding on a plaintive note: "And what on earth am I going to wear?"

5

Ness found herself after all liking Mr. Micah Pebbleworth of the Pools, who had come North with the cheque in his wallet. What a wonderful little dinner he had arranged for the family party in Blackwood's Hotel, no strangers except the Provost and Mrs. Colquhoun, and everything so nice—choice of two soups, cold salmon, chicken, and ices with hot chocolate sauce. She supposed it was all illegal and black market, but it was nice. Champagne, tasted for but the second time in her life, had a lovely tart, pringly, exciting sort of flavour.

Mr. Pebbleworth was solidly middle-aged, thoroughly filling his dinner-jacket and trousers with braid down the seams. He had a wise, kindly face and plain good manners. His speech was solid Lancashire. Kit said afterwards that he was jannock, whatever that meant. He sat at one end of the table with Ness on his right and Olly on his left: the latter lapped in a blissful sense of having, after long waiting, duly arrived in his proper sphere.

"You're not expecting a speech from me, Mr. Pebbleworth?" said Ness. "I simply couldn't make one if I tried."

"Not if you don't want to. We'll get quite enough speechifying from his nibs up there, I reckon," Mr. Pebbleworth said, indicating the Provost at the other end of the table. "When the time comes, put out your hand, grab the cheque, smile and bow to the people in front. That's the lot, and I'll see you through."

He was a sensible man, and Ness liked men to be sensible. After all, she supposed, you couldn't run a huge Pools concern without sense. What a difference from the Provost, now holding forth to poor Kit and Duggie on the magnitude of his war effort. He was a moderately successful ironmonger, given to wide-winged collars and a shopwalker's morning coat. He liked wearing the chain of office about his shoulders. Somewhere in the middle of the table, his vague, bleached wife was making heavy weather of it with Quin who, however, the importance of contacts always in his mind, was willing to persevere with even such an unpromising lady.

Coffee came. Ness was offered a liqueur and, with that ever so slightly unfortunate abruptness of hers, declined. Neither Olly nor Duggie refused a second invitation. Ness began to fret. The champagne, the excitement, and the swirl of bitter cigar smoke in the small private dining-room were uniting to create in her person what she might afterwards have described as a swirling queasiness. She had at once the sensation of drumming in her ears and head and the inner feeling of being terribly alone.

It was a relief to see at length the turn of Mr. Pebbleworth's plump wrist and his glance at the chaste face of the Longines bound round it with a gold strap. He tapped lightly on the edge of his coffee saucer and said "Provost!" and again "Provost!" The ironmonger's eloquence faded on the suddenly quiet air.

"What's that you were saying, Mr. Pebbleworth?"

"Time to go now, if you don't mind."

"Yes, yes! Mustn't keep the people waiting."

This was for Ness the incredible moment. There was no way of escape now, and she surrendered. Mr. Pebbleworth very decently and tactfully saw to it that she had ample time by herself in the toilet, but the process was remorseless. They had her into the lighted interior of a massive Daimler before she knew where she was, so to speak. It was just a step downhill from Blackwood's to the Rialto, but two Daimlers for the party it had to be.

Ness heard the Provost's speech as a mere bellowing elsewhere. "... this outstanding occasion in the annals of our beloved town." She waited, trembling, in the wings with Mr. Pebbleworth. (For long enough thereafter the Provost's oration was one of Kit's favourite turns for Ness's private amusement. Her acute ear had picked out all the worn phrases, especially the Provost's weakness for "for to" in place of a simple infinitive; and she had strung them together in a rigmarole of banality.) As Mr. Pebbleworth had surmised, the civic head spoke at length, and Ness thought her knees must collapse beneath her. The dreadful moment came surprisingly with the clasp of Mr. Pebbleworth's hand on her arm and his quiet words: "Now, lass! Take it easy."

The tumult of applause came at her like a storm, with a

blast of animal heat, from the auditorium. The brightness of footlights assaulted her eyes, so that she hardly noticed a pretty child in a pretty frock curtsying before her and handing her a bouquet of carnations. The applause seemed to mount in volume, and Ness had the wit to curtsy to the house in turn, then bury her face among the exquisite, coddled blooms.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," the Provost belled for a hearing, "I ask Miss Nimmo for to come forward and graciously receive this handsome cheque from Pebbleworth's Pools, and very good luck to her say all of us."

It was thunder from the audience now, shot with demands of "Speech! Speech!" from the back. Ness shook her head with a smile, and Olly, in the front row, observed to himself that she cut a damned handsome, even charming, figure at the peak of her hour, smiling there, her face flushed, bowing, clasping the carnations to her throat.

Then she was back in the shelter of the wings with Mr. Pebbleworth.

"Well done, lass! Let me hold your flowers while you put that cheque away in your bag," he said. "And let me give you a bit of advice, lass. Stick to the money. Invest it safely, spend it carefully, and don't let anybody roosh you into fancy investments you don't understand. It's good money, never mind where it came from."

She felt very weary when she got home at length, almost as if she had been physically battered. Dug and Olly had gladly remained behind in Blackwood's to enjoy Mr. Pebbleworth's unrelenting hospitality, but Quin, the industrious one, the genuine hater of loose ends, had come home with her and had taken the mass of correspondence into the dining-room.

"I'll probably be up till after midnight with this lot," he had not failed to point out.

"It's extremely good of you, Quin," Ness had said sincerely. Now she appealed to Kit for further help. "Make me a cup of tea, please, dear; as strong as you like. What with champagne and cheering!"

"It was an odd affair," mused Kit as she filled the kettle. "In fact, it was daft. We must all be daft when it comes to money. Have I said that before?"

"Yes," Ness agreed ruefully.

She was thinking over all that had happened so suddenly, so much in just a few hours in a lifetime. She still had to struggle to understand what had happened to her ; nay, to beat down the complex consequences of these happenings as they pressed on her spirit.

"Do you know what touched me most to-night?" she asked.

"No, what was that?" Kit was eager.

"When we were coming out of the cinema. That crowd round the car and the policemen holding them back. They seemed so pleased that I had won all that money. They seemed so kind, the friendly things they shouted to me. The poor creatures reaching out and trying to touch me."

"Yes. The touch was just to share your luck, a kiss of the queen's hand. They were all being you for the moment, getting their share of money and glory. You're the she-goddess of this town . . . for the time being. It's all quite simple."

"I wish I could think so! Oh, dear me! I must run upstairs and change into something comfy while the tea's infusing."

She remembered that she had kicked off her house slippers in the sewing-room, and from her bedroom, slipperless, she went quietly upstairs, and, opening the door, dropped like a plummet into the old pit of bitterness and fear.

It was nothing new. She had known this shabby secret long enough. Quin on his knees in the dark at the open window, Olly's binoculars at his eyes ; the uncurtained bedroom windows of thoughtless women at the backs of the tenement buildings across the tennis courts. But on such a night, at such a moment of such a night, when escape from her private horror of the close was within reach. The dirty muddle of human existence !

Olly and Dug returned as she was finishing her second cup of tea. Both were mellow, inclined to an optimistic view of life.

"Jolly fine evening!" Olly opined. "Thought myself that the dinner was quite slap-up and the little ceremony very well handled. You took it very nicely, Miss Nimmo, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Walked it," agreed Dug rather sleepily.

Quin had come quietly into the kitchen. Did he really imagine that in the moment of opening and closing the sewing-room door, with her gasped "Oh!" in between, she had not seen him? But what else, she quickly asked herself, could he do?

"It all went quite nicely, I thought, though I hated most of it. I liked that Mr. Pebbleworth. But I'm just about dropping with fatigue. There's one thing," she said, rising, and her heart cold, "I think I ought to tell you all. I've quite decided to manage the money myself. I think it should be—well, outside the family, if you know what I mean."

"Hear, hear!" applauded Duggie.

"Exactly what I've thought all along," said Olly.

Quin had nothing to say at all.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WHITE YACHT

I

THE ROOTS of the trouble about the money were all within herself, Ness decided. She was possessed by too many fears, both known and unacknowledged. She realised only now how little she knew of business practice.

Was it that all her thinking about money for more than twenty years on end had been in terms of four or five pounds a week : uncertain, liable to fluctuate or even vanish at any moment ? You decided to do even the bed-linen at home to save a shilling or two in the week from the laundry ; you took your custom away from the old family grocer and registered with the Co-op. for the sake of the divvie. You could not sleep at nights in the same room with Kit for thinking how shillings and then pounds might be scraped and skimmed to keep her decently dressed, to buy her a tennis racket as good as the other girls', to pay the specialist his ritual three guineas for examining her eyes.

She sat in the attic sewing-room, thinking of these things. It was the first day of May, bright and warm, the sun of late afternoon thrusting up the Firth to overwhelm the white walls on the other side of the water with a fluid gold. She was, in fact, finishing the last morsel of sempstress work left over from her days of dependence—a pair of tartan trews for young Master Macpherson, the publican's son, to wear under his new kilt—and she was happy enough to be about done with that long drudgery. It dwelt with her, however, a deep-seated ache under the immediate pleasure, that she still did not know how to handle the money, the forty thousand-odd pounds handed to her in the honourable cheque of Pebbleworth's Pools by Provost Colquhoun in the Rialto Cinema only six days before.

Ness imagined how other, bolder, less complicated women

would deal with the resources so suddenly put at their service. A lot of them would just go out and buy hats and fur coats, frankly in the black market for the charwoman's book of coupons. Others would stuff their houses with furniture and break all the rules in having the rooms painted and papered. Some would buy their sons and brothers, and therefore themselves, fancy cars at fancy prices ; some would travel ; and ah ! if she could only herself make up her mind to cut loose and go across the ocean in the *Queen Mary* to see how it fared with Bambi, the wild one of the family ; a lovely feminine version of Dug, whose letters hinted at disappointment with life in Maryland, down in some remote neighbourhood near the Chesapeake Bay.

But she could do nothing, it seemed ; she was paralysed within the vice of fears and what she believed to be obligations. It was terrible that she could not imagine how she might decently reward Mr. Pomphrey, the author of the fairy tale. There was something to be done for Quin even yet. Kit could be looked after ; the girl could almost look after herself, what with bursaries and things. But there was Duggie to get started, started on something steady : nobody could guess what it might be ; but somehow started. And she had done nothing but let the lawyers talk her into buying Government securities and the assurance of twelve pounds a week.

Then she laughed out loud as she bent over the seat of Master Macpherson's trews, suddenly realising that she had not been so guileless after all. Against even the obvious disapproval of Mr. Gordon, whom she was beginning to like, she had instructed that five of the forty-two thousand pounds should be left free in the bank for whatsoever use might occur to her when she could emerge from the coils of indecision.

"I'd like to keep it for presents and things like that," she told the lawyer.

"Presents !" Mr. Gordon snuffled, as if he had just heard the last expression of female lunacy. He mumbled on in the manner of one who addresses an unseen audience on the follies of those in his immediate presence. "Five thousand pounds on current account, earning not a penny for anybody except the bank. Not even deposit receipt, even if the miserable beggars pay only one and a quarter."

"No," Ness contrived to be firm, "I may want this money quite quickly. You see, I may decide to buy a house."

"And that can just as easily be financed out of savings. A good Endowment Policy, now. Still——" Mr. Gordon produced one of his large handkerchiefs in harness pattern and blew into it mightily. His long nose emerged extremely pink and damp, his sense of the profits involved in conveyancing revived. "Still, there's perhaps something in that. A tidy little house in the West End. I think that one of our clients might . . ."

So it was there under her fingers. She had at least the power, if not the determination, how to use it. And that was young Macpherson's breeks finished : the humble end of her career as sempstress so far as probabilities could take anybody. She folded the small garment with thoughtful care. They so pathetically symbolised the end of nearly twenty years of labour, weariness and eyestrain, poorly rewarded. And then, like the old fool that she was in her own estimation, she was wondering what she would do with herself now !

She stood awhile in the bow of the attic window, and her eyes followed the familiar track across the placid waters of the evening Firth to the white walls and spires and trees of the townlet on the other shore. Perhaps it was over there, the secret of her release from indecision ; she was almost sure it was, but she cannily remembered the fable of the child and the gleaming window on the other side of the valley. "There, where thou art not . . ." she could never forget the phrase from the Schubert song.

Then she saw the white yacht again nosing out of the Norloch to turn down-Firth by the Tartan Buoy. She had her father's eye for a vessel and, as a shepherd knows each of a flock of a thousand by headmark, she knew that this was the same little ship she had seen as something in a dream on the evening—was it really only the week before last?—when Olly was filling in the lucky coupon and she was placid in cynicism.

What a pretty thing it was, with the high bows, the gracious backward slope of the windows of the navigating compartment, the stubby mast with the burgee streaming, the brasses shining, and then the flow of the Blue Ensign above the cheerful churn

of her wash ! She was moving swiftly, sweetly, towards the freedom of the outer Firth, towards bog myrtle-scented lochs and kyles.

Ness turned to the opening of the door behind. It was Quintin, blinking and frowning.

"You're home early surely, Quin ?"

"Yes. Things were rather slack in the office, so I thought I'd come back and finish off the last of the correspondence about the money."

"You've been wonderfully good about that, Quin ! Thank goodness you were here to help me. Olly and Dug mean well, but they never seem to get going properly."

"A mere matter of business experience, of method," Quin dismissed the qualifications of his brother and the paying guest. "It would be more to the point if Olly and Duggie would begin to realise that work is really work. And by the way, Ness, I heard this afternoon that Dungavel is on the market. I thought you might care to think of that."

This was why Quin had come home early. Ness knew this brother of hers thoroughly. If she was the most stupid of the family, as she firmly believed, she had somehow the gift of anticipating his every move, every quirk of his mind. Perhaps Quin, aware of her obtuseness in business matters, oversimplified his approaches to her. She enjoyed playing with him all the more.

"I'm not sure that I want to buy a house in Garvel," she said with deliberate slowness. "I'd rather move somewhere else, perhaps across the water. I don't know."

"What an extraordinary idea ! All our interests are here, surely."

What Quin meant, of course, was that all his interests were in Garvel. Ness knew well that what he would have called a good address in the West End would be a help to his professional advancement. He had already been at her with some tangential talk of a partnership and about guaranteeing an overdraft—whatever that might mean—to buy shares in a fruit and vegetable company or something that would, somehow, quite likely lead to an arrangement with old Rowley Peacock. Ness had not even bothered to try to understand what it was all about. She only knew that Quin was up to one

of his tricks, and she was interested solely in the blank need to head him off.

"I don't know about that," she hedged, staring out across the golden Firth. "In fact, Quin, I've the funny idea that the first thing I'm going to buy is a motor yacht, a white yacht."

"Good God !"

"There's no need to swear. Why shouldn't I buy a yacht ?"

"But who's going to run the thing ?"

That was not really the question in Quintin's mind, but it was the first objection he could think of.

"Duggie could run it, surely."

"Duggie might find something a good deal more useful and profitable to do."

"I suppose he could. I hope he will," snapped Ness. "And that's another use I have for my money."

They were fated to differ ; and Quin could never see that he was continually goading a lioness with young. He completely understood, however, the fact of Ness's so-easily-roused hostility. She came at him again, the claws showing.

"Duggie isn't going to spend his life running a motor boat, is he ?"

"He would if he could," Quin countered sourly.

"That's what you want to think."

"Well, look at it !" and Quin spread his arms to indicate the vast extent of his brother's fecklessness.

"I was talking about buying a motor yacht. Duggie can run the thing in his spare time. You could, if you wanted. I don't see why Mr. Pomphrey couldn't. I don't even see why Kit and I couldn't. If I want to buy a motor yacht, I don't see . . ."

"Of course, Ness," Quin agreed hastily. "It's only that we're rather gulping at things before we've quite agreed on a policy."

"We !"

The gust of indignation in Ness's tone and the turn of her proud and tilted head frightened him. He knew very well the dangers to himself that resided in the power of his own tongue.

"Really, Ness," he tried to laugh it away, "I'm only using a loose phrase ! *You*, of course. Surely I can offer you

some advice? I really don't think a motor yacht is a fantastic luxury. It's only a question of proportion, of order."

2

A delightful awareness of mischief, if not downright wickedness, informed the spirit of Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo as, with Andrew Buchan by her side and Kit roaming the decks of the river steamer, she stood behind the high port paddle-box of the *Duchess of Roxburgh* and saw the little town on the other side of the water come nearer and larger.

She felt now that it was on a naughty whim she had taken the decisive step to buy a boat; something almost like spiting Quin, though she liked to believe also that she was making a necessary declaration of independence. Olly had approved handsomely, agreeing that yachting is a pleasant and a gentlemanly sport, and recalling the golden days when his father ran both a steam yacht and a racing cutter. (He also had it in his simple mind that qualification for one of the better yacht clubs was within sight.) So that for Ness was one way of giving Olly his share of the fortune, and she had plunged. The advertising columns of the *Glasgow Herald* and the brokers' lists of vessels for sale had made delightful reading over a fortnight, and then a visit to the Buchans' flat one evening had aroused the professional interest of the ship-builder. With Kit discreetly introduced as chaperon, they were now crossing the water to inspect M.Y. *Dulcibelle*, recommended to Andrew Buchan by a connection in the trade.

At the sight of her, quiet at her moorings before Goldie's Yard, a choke of excitement rose in Ness's throat and she thought of her father, Wee Captain Slocum. What a moment this would have been for him, what fun to watch him eye the craft for the first time! She was not, this *Dulcibelle*, the sleek and expensive beauty that, coming out of the Norloch in the evening sunlight, had put ideas into her head. This craft was stockier, sturdier, but with her own honest grace of fitness for her job in coastal waters.

"Twenty-eight feet overall," mused Andrew Buchan as

they stood on Goldie's slip. "She looks an honest job of boat-building from here. But we'll see."

A man from the yard rowed them out in a tub of a dinghy, with Kit perched high in the bow and the combined weights of Ness and Andrew Buchan reducing the freeboard at the stern to a perilous three inches or so. When they were on board, the *Dulcibelle* seemed to smell regrettably of bilge, oil and damp, but the womenfolk exclaimed with delight when the man from the yard unlocked the cabin doors and revealed the bijou charm of the living quarters.

"And now, ladies," said Andrew Buchan, pulling off his jacket and rolling his shirt-sleeves to reveal the hairy immensity of his biceps, "if you can amuse yourselves for a while, I'll go round with our friend here and see what's what."

Ness and Kit quickly, but with acute feminine pleasure, discovered that to "go round" the *Dulcibelle* was a phrase of convenience merely. You crawled fore and aft within highly-confined spaces, always bumping into or squeezing past Andrew Buchan and his collaborator as the former rapped on bulkheads, lifted floorboards or stuck the blade of his knife into sundry parts of the wooden structure so cunningly assembled. But the girls found enchantment in the little world afloat. Two cots in the fore part of the ship. . . .

"That'll do the men," said Ness. "You and I have our harem in the cabin. The settee berths are a jolly sight more comfortable than these canvas cots. That's four on a weekend trip, except you could toss to decide who sleeps ashore."

"You've thought it all out, haven't you?" Kit teased her. "And just look at this tiny lavvy, Ness! Isn't it a duck?"

Ness meanwhile discovered in a compartment opposite that office the galley, and considered it with a grave housewifely eye.

"H'm, quite nice. But we can improve a bit on that, I hope. You can see that mostly men have been using it. Of all the clumsy brutes in a kitchen!"

They sat for a while in the open cockpit above the cruiser stern of the *Dulcibelle*, numbed by the heat of the May sun. Andrew Buchan came upon them again, businesslike.

"Now, if you ladies could move out of the way, I'd like .

to go right through the inventory with our friend here. We won't be long now."

The women scrambled up into the isolation of the navigating compartment, with the tiny brass wheel against the exciting dashboard and its dials. Kit sat in the steersman's place and pretended, with utterly female handlessness, to swing the ship in tight circles that would, in practice, have sorely strained the stoutest hull.

"Let's go places, Ness!" she cried, with a wildness of excitement that prompted her sister to glance anxiously. Kit started to intone:

*Chimborazi, Catopaxi,
They had stolen my soul away!*

"What on earth are you talking about, child?" asked Ness in her more unfortunate tone of realism.

"Oh, nothing! Just romance. The idea of going places. . . . I wonder where this boat will take us. Oh, Ness, isn't it lovely that you can give us this? Out of that beastly tenement . . ."

The girl gripped Ness's arm and snuggled to her side with the warmth that came out of her Italian inheritance. It was embarrassing that Mr. Buchan loomed behind them at that moment, saying:

"Excuse me, ladies, but I'd like to hear the machinery turning over."

His great forearm, now smeared with dirt and oil, came over Kit's shoulder, and his strong fingers did something with a something on the dashboard. Immediately the Nimmo sisters jumped to the shock of a sudden roar, followed by a drumming in the bowels of the vessel under their persons.

"That's all right," Andrew Buchan assured them with a grin. "She starts sweetly, doesn't she? I'll be back with you in a minute, and that'll be about all."

"Sweetly!" Kit repeated when his bullet head had disappeared again. "I suppose that's an engineer's idea of the *mot juste*. I hope it doesn't go on like this all the time."

"It will be quite different when we're moving," Ness asserted boldly.

They all went back to Goldie's slip in the squat dinghy, the second journey rather more perilous than the first by reason of an east wind rising as the sun wheeled westwards towards evening and a consequent licking of salt water over the sunken sternsheets. Andrew Buchan paused on the weedy slope of the jetty to look back on the *Dulcibelle*.

"Well, Miss Nimmo," he announced, "to the best of my knowledge and belief, that's a tidy boat, stout and well-found. At the price mentioned, it's a very fair bargain."

"Then I'll take it," said Ness.

"Of course, I'd insist on one or two little touches here and there. The paintwork might have been freshened a bit more often, and there are one or two items missing from the inventory."

Ness wanted to declare decisively that these small things were of no account to her, so great and hungry was her immediate desire to possess the *Dulcibelle*. The man from Goldie's Yard, a thin person with a wry artisan's face, anticipated her.

"That'll be all right, Mr. Buchan. We know the boat, and the owner says we're to do everything in reason. If the lady's interested, I'll see Mr. Tom on Monday, and we'll get cracking." He glanced out towards the anchorage and added: "You could buy a worse boat."

"Yes," Andrew Buchan agreed, his eyes wistfully following those of the foreman rigger. "She's a good job."

The bus took them back along the shore road, past the great houses the merchant princes of yesterday built for their summer pleasure, most of them with flagpole and gaff on the lawn near the water's edge, but everything decrepit and overgrown now. Andrew Buchan could name them and their former owners and the craft that had been proudly attached to each.

"You'd see a dozen big steam yachts anchored in the loch here, every one a beauty, and sailing craft by the hundred. They were tough nuts, these big business men, but they kept a lot of beautiful things about them. And look at their mansions now, hardly one in family occupation: convalescent homes or boarding-houses or broken up into flats!"

"You couldn't get the servants to run them now," observed Ness sagely.

"And you couldn't afford it. That little boat of yours would have been a poor man's job thirty years ago. Now it's almost up to the luxury class. I sometimes wonder if anybody's really much the better of the change."

Ness thought swiftly of Mr. Gordon's alarming declaration that the unearned income from forty thousand pounds left about twelve pounds a week to live on. As the bus sped along, taking the fierce corners of the shore road with a magnificent disregard of whatsoever might be round them, Ness wondered if it wouldn't be good modern sense to spend a thousand a year and let the capital dwindle throughout the probable span of her lifetime. She was lost in wry contemplation of the law of diminishing returns when the bus drew up at length in the car park by the pier of the little town across the water.

"Here we are, then," she said brightly according to a pre-conceived plan of her own. "I wondered, Mr. Buchan, if it wouldn't be nice to wait and have dinner in the Crown, then get the last boat. There's a late one on Saturdays, and it's such a lovely evening."

"Oh, no! I'm afraid I really must get home. If you don't mind."

The big man spoke with the haste of embarrassment, and it came on Ness that, all afternoon, she had been subtly aware of a faint remoteness in him from her own mood of excitement; he was usually so hearty and strong as befitted his bulk. Even his few words about the houses and yachts of the rich seemed to have been uttered by a man with the feeling of twilight about him, now she came to think of it.

"Well, we must have a cup of tea, at least," she suggested.

"Yes," and he turned his great wrist to look at the watch bound to it with a strap like an athlete's. "We've more than twenty minutes before the next boat comes in."

As they were recrossing the Firth at length, and when Kit had left them to range the decks and alleyways of the little ship, Ness Nimmo and Andrew Buchan sat together on a bench towards the stern and, looking aft over the churn of the vessel's wake, shared for a while the morose silence of friendly folk of different sexes who apprehend, however vaguely, the nearness of an awkward intimacy. Ness felt constrained to ease the tension by appearing to ignore its existence.

"And oh, Mr. Buchan!" she began, brightly brittle, "how am I to thank you for taking all that trouble about my poor wee boat? Dragging you across the water on a fine Saturday afternoon. . . ."

"But that's a pleasure, Miss Nimmo," he turned to her with a smile of relief. "Busman's holiday, you know, and it takes my mind off things. If you want to do me a small favour in return, I wonder"—he hesitated—"I wonder if you could spare time to see Janet oftener. You see," he blundered now, "I'm a bit worried about her."

"Oh dear! I'm sorry."

This was it, the personal problem coming down on her at speed, and she was afraid. If it was sickness and pain she would rejoice to help as she could; but if it was a case of spouses falling out, their first dream dispersed by incompatibility, then she wished desperately not to hear anything, not to be the third party conscripted into an affair touching the intimate emotions.

"Has she not been so well?" Ness asked lamely.

"That's just it," Andrew Buchan confided uneasily. "It may be her time of life, if you don't mind me putting it that way. Janet's older than me, you know. But it's moods; you might call it melancholia. Then she's apt to slip out of the house and stay away, perhaps for hours, even when the children need her. I was out three hours the other night looking for her, until I found her in her cousin's house away in the East End."

"It's sometimes like that," said Ness. "It'll probably pass. I'll certainly try to help. I'm very sorry."

"It's the children, you see," said the shipbuilder.

Her glance revealed him staring morosely over the up-river sandbanks, now passing close to port as the steamer made her sweep towards the pier, and she was sorry for the man, so simple and strong and baffled by an ordinary enough complexity of life. She could not guess at all at the intensity of his love for Janet, and she dared to think that much of his bewilderment was over the upset in his household. Orderly, forthright men of his type, absorbed in their professional work, were apt to see the world falling to pieces when illness or domestic mishap, so little as a spring cleaning, disturbed the peace of the background against which they reclined for leisure.

"If Janet were to be really ill," Ness said carefully, "you could rely on Kit and me to look after the children. That would be nothing with those school meals they have nowadays. But I think you'll find it'll come all right. It," she hesitated primly, "it takes different women different ways, of course. Usually it passes quite quickly."

Very careful was her speech : not really on account of the delicacy of the subject as between an average decent married man and an average sensible spinster ; rather in protection of her own acute sensibility about the relations between man and woman. She was relieved to hear him laugh kindly.

"No, no, no, Miss Nimmo ! We won't take it quite so far as that. It's just that I suppose I had to tell somebody and you being always a good friend of Janet's. I'm sorry I've bothered you with my private affairs. And I really did enjoy going over that new boat of yours. That's a right good job, and you'll have a lot of fun with her. It's only if you could just find time to look in and see Janet now and again."

When the family and the paying guest were reassembled in No. 20 Stornoway Street late that evening, Ness and Kit had to rehearse the events of the day and express their delight in the looks and equipment of the *Dulcibelle*. Quin had many sharp questions to ask, his eyes restless behind the rimless glasses.

"And you're really quite satisfied about this boat, Ness ? And Buchan thinks it a sound investment ?"

"Oh, haven't we told you ?" Ness asked wearily. "Why keep asking ?"

"Simply because you don't seem to me to be particularly enthusiastic."

"If you must have it in words of one syllable," Ness began, rising from her cup of tea at the kitchen table, "I think the boat is fine. I like it, and I'm going to buy it. But really, Quin——"

She was maddened at once by his capacity to nag and by his too acute perception of her weaknesses.

"Do you, or anybody else here, possess the recipe for complete happiness ? I'd like to have it."

Throughout the dragging hours of a bad night she was sorry for having said that, but it was devilish that Quintin

could somehow never see all round the simplest problems of behaviour and would make no allowances.

3

She was like a woman with a new dress about the *Dulcibelle* ; she wanted to have it home at once and, so to speak, try it on. She discovered, however, that the careful, man-created system of business procedure discouraged haste in the acquisitive. What with the delays in Goldie's Yard to carry out the jobs of renovation listed by Andrew Buchan, and getting something called insurance cover, and having trouble with the Admiralty about moorings in Carpoek Bay on their own side of the water, the brief northern summer would be past—as Ness frequently observed in her impatience—before they could all get the good of her purchase.

Men of the British races, it seemed, took boats seriously, as a woman takes clothes, the upbringing of babies and the ordering of her home. The funny thing was that even the apparently casual Duggie was more cautious than any of the others in his attitude to the commissioning of the *Dulcibelle* ; and she was happy about that. Now, by a divine accident, Duggie had in the yacht something that profoundly, gravely interested him—to the point that Quin once remarked in his nasty way that you would think he had bought it out of his earnings.

It was Duggie who, occasionally accompanied by Olly, daily crossed the Firth to the Norloch and, as he phrased it, bulldozed Goldie's into activity ; in the process (another of his silly phrases) chiselling out of that easy-going firm all sorts of desirable goods, such as paint, odd lengths of wood, rope, jerricans, waste, oil, tools and (Duggie's triumph, though he admitted that it had been brazenly swiped) a kedge anchor and line properly belonging to a distinguished member of the steel trade. Duggie insisted that the boat be properly found, let Ness and Kit clamour as they might to have what the family came to call the Opening Cruise. Ness was mortified but still slightly amused to see that, when the boat was to be

brought across the Firth to her new moorings, Duggie was still unwilling to have the women with him. It was to be a man's job, this first venture in open waters.

This started the usual sort of row with Quin, who, so far from wanting the owner to enjoy the first movements of the *Dulcibelle* in sweet, personal possession, laid it down that the delivery of the boat to her permanent moorings in Carpoek Bay should be the concern of professional seamen.

"In the Lord's name, why?" asked Duggie, grinning from his favourite seat in the basket-chair. "Boy! Didn't I take a DUKW across to Salerno?"

"I take the view, and strongly," said Quin in his best court manner, "that it is for the seller to deliver the vessel intact to the buyer at the point indicated by the latter. Anything might happen on the way across—that is, between delivery and acceptance—and then there would be all sorts of delicate issues affecting insurance, responsibility—you know what I mean?"

"Search me, brother!"

"That characteristic flippancy strengthens my point—the point of responsibility."

"If Duggie and Mr. Pomphrey can't sail the boat across the Firth," Kit cut in acidly, "who on earth is to be trusted to sail her afterwards?"

"If you had a glimmering of the subtle nature of the Law of Contracts . . ."

"How long, O Lord, how long?" groaned Duggie, letting his large body slide down the back of the basket-chair, his right hand dramatically clutching his forehead.

"If you don't mind me saying something . . ."

Olly had something to say, and he bowed faintly to his hostess for permission. He then continued:

"I must say, Quin, with all sorts of respect for your legal knowledge and all that . . . If Duggie with his experiences in the Services, and I with a great deal of experience of handling boats in my younger days—I mean to say, if Dug and I can't be trusted to navigate a 28-foot boat in first-class condition from the Norloch to Carpoek Bay, who the devil, as young Kit says, more or less, is to be trusted to sail the ship afterwards?"

"These eternal arguments you start, Quin!" Ness was constrained to cry.

"In your own interest usually—if you could only see it."

"The boat belongs to me," and Ness stamped her foot on the worn waxcloth.

"Oh, if that's the way of it!"

Quin left the company with a sort of huffy dignity, and Ness heard him move upstairs: no doubt, she reflected sourly, to enjoy a delirious half-hour with Olly's binoculars.

So Duggie and Olly together brought the *Dulcibelle* across the Firth, and that over an anchorage sheeted with the driven spray of a sou'-wester blustering up the Firth. It was such a rough evening for the time of year, and Duggie and Olly were so late for supper that Ness spent one hour of acute anxiety for their safety, but she realised on their return that, from all the signs, they had merely been celebrating the successful conclusion of the voyage and congratulating each other on unique navigational skill in the Ferry Inn at Kempock. She could smile indulgently on their proud garrulity.

Late that evening, when her work about the gas-stove wakened Duggie out of a drowse in the basket-chair, he suddenly said:

"Do you know, Ness? That little boat of yours has got me going. It's putting ideas into my head. Our beloved Quin would never believe it, but I'm beginning to see a way of making a living—I mean, in a way I'd like."

"That's fine, Dug," Ness replied, studying to seem casual though this was for her a moment of surprise and happiness.

"You know, of course, the sort of bloke I am—perhaps better than I know myself," Duggie continued, swinging his feet on to her kitchen table. "All very well in a rammy and that sort of thing. But stick me in an office, or even on a farm—anywhere there's regular hours and rules and bosses—and you might as well shove me in jankers. I'm just bound to break out, and that's the hell of it, if you like. But this boat—mucking about, doing things, being your own boss, meeting the boys. I'll bet you five bob I've put in more hours of honest work these last two weeks than our Quin, the one and only."

"I dare say you have, Dug, and I'm glad you've enjoyed it. But what about the living?"

"It's a bit vague in my mind just yet, but it's boiling up. You see: loads of bodies would like to have a holiday in a tidy cabin cruiser, if only for swank. But they don't know the ropes, and they would never think of buying one. But if you could have two or three like the *Dulcibelle*, and have a sailor-mechanic with the pukka gen in charge of every one, you could raise quids in charters from May till September. On the side, you could run day cruises for parties, like the buses. You could probably get anchorage work for the boats in winter. Evening cruises . . . There's no end to it."

Ness, dribbling the oatmeal through her fingers for tomorrow's porridge, responded to the enthusiasm of her brother, but, with new-found caution, controlled the tone of her speech.

"That sounds a really good idea, Dug. If you could work out a scheme, it wouldn't be difficult to find the capital, would it? It might only be two or three thousand."

"Lord, you're talking now like our beautiful soliciteer!" laughed Duggie, returning his feet to the floor with a clump. "Don't tell that guy anything about our scheme, Ness, or we're sunk in balance-sheets and degrees of responsibility and Bob's your uncle; with our Quin well out in the blue. And I say, Ness, do you think you could run me up a nice cup of char?"

He was a real wheedler, but few women born could stand out against that slow, romantic charm of the Levantine in him, that impression he could give, at once masculine in force and feminine in tenderness, of completely understanding the small worries of all women.

"You're just a nuisance, Dug!" cried Ness, all Scottish for the moment. "You men never seem to realise that this is the end of the rationing period."

She opened the cupboard door behind the gas-stove and seized her tea-caddy, saying in the brittle way of housekeeping females:

"At least, I'm entitled to know when I'm going to get my first proper sail in the *Dulcibelle*."

"Just wait for the weather now, sister, that's all."

Wait she must for nearly a week until she felt a fool,

possessing a boat and everybody asking about it, while depressions kept moving in from the Atlantic in glum procession. It was near the end of the month of May, but morning after morning the hills were swathed in moving mists, the rain fell, and the Firth was a sullen and unfriendly boil of broken water.

It was a little enough thing in itself, but there grew on Ness the frustrate feeling that of all her money she had had little use; then the harsher realisation that there were many satisfactions in life money could not command. She was not comforted when, one evening towards the end of the week, Quin bleakly calculated and announced how much money was (as he phrased it) going to waste each day on an immobilised pleasure craft, taking into account interest on capital, deterioration, insurance, anchorage charges and others of those concerns which so bitterly fascinated him.

"No ruddy fun in your life at all," grunted Duggie, himself not a little cast down by the sequence of events. "Every summer a wet one."

"Got to take the rough with the smooth," cut in Olly, not long back from the Club. "And as a matter of fact, I've just had a jolly good look at the barograph, and I'd lay pretty long odds that we're going to have a dashed fine spell of weather."

"Then we'll make it next Wednesday. We'll all take a holiday!" cried Ness. "Kit and I'll make up nice things to eat. We could land somewhere and have tea. Shouldn't we have a bottle of wine or something to christen the boat . . . I mean, of course, drink its health?"

"Good idea!" said Olly gravely. "I can fix that through the Club. A couple of bottles of bubbly, eh? Pity you can't lay hands on a magnum nowadays."

"Throw in a case of beer for me. I had too much Nasty Spumante in Italy," laughed Duggie. "A bottle of unsweetened lime juice for Quin, don't forget. And oh, I say, children, Wednesday will be Derby Day!"

"We must have a bet, then. Let me see that paper."

Kit observed with speculative interest the excitement of her sister. There was a flush on the ivory cheeks, a strange brightness in the dark eyes, as she turned the sheet to scan the

list of runners. Duggie opened the drawer of the kitchen table and handed Ness a skewer, saying :

“Try that, Ness. It’s as good a tipster as you’ll get.”

“No, no ! Here’s one with a nice name—Airborne. I’m going to bet on Airborne.”

“Rank outsider,” snapped Quin, as if racing form had been among his numerous studies.

“Good enough, Ness !” Duggie encouraged his sister in daftness. “I’ve been airborne myself dozens of times and never crashed yet.”

“Now, that’s a very queer coincidence,” added Olly. “Only this very evening I was talking to a chappie in the Club, and this fellow said to me : ‘If you want a good outsider, Pomphrey, don’t forget Airborne.’ These were his very words.”

“Well, let’s all back Airborne !” Ness cried.

“I don’t happen to bet,” sniffed Quin. “That’s about the last refuge of the mentally defective.”

“I’m one of the loonies, then,” laughed Duggie. “Put me down for five bob each way. That’ll about bust me if it packs up.”

“I’ve a jolly good mind to risk a sovereign each way,” said Olly gravely.

“And,” declared Ness, “I’m going to put twenty-five pounds each way on Airborne.”

Everybody’s head jerked to look at her ; and all except Quin knew against whom—and against what, for that matter—her recklessness was directed.

“I don’t suppose,” Kit interjected in her dry way, “that my small tanner each way comes into these large dealings.”

“Certainly, Kit !” cried Olly courteously. “I’ll place the investment with a perfectly reliable chap first thing to-morrow. Anything from tanners to ponies upwards—all the same thing to this chap.”

Quin said nothing. Ness once more started to prepare for the feeding of her charges on the morrow. It was remarkable to Kit and Duggie, and in a lesser degree to Olly, that Ness was gaining the confidence to defeat Quin on his own ground. Duggie could not resist the last stroke.

“Coming with us on Wednesday, Quin ?”

4

It was easy to think of the Firth as a sentient creature with many moods. For a week on end it had been a sullen animal of offensive habits and evil intentions. Now, on this early Wednesday of June, it seemed to glow like a happy princess in a fairy story ; like the delicious Snow White in the picture. Ness hummed the jaunty little work-song of the dwarfs as the *Dulcibelle* made northwards across the water.

This was happiness. This was the immediate, fully conscious enjoyment of a state of bliss ; and that had been for years one of her favourite subjects of speculation. She could not clearly remember having been in the condition of perfect happiness since the care of the family had fallen to her as quite a young girl, and all that had happened before was nearly gone from her mind, for she had put girlhood away as an illusion. Happiness was for the young only, she had determined. She could see it working in Kit sometimes, as when on being given a new party frock or on passing first in an exam, the child could still hug herself physically and gasp : " Oh, Ness ! I'm so happy ! " And she was herself in this moment, at the age of thirty-eight, being happy.

Physical beauty about her ministered powerfully to her sense of contentment, in the shapes and colours of high hills, in the crinkled charm of close-gathered trees in fresh leaf, in the modulated grace of the Firth's hilly bastions stretching away down to the loom of the outer islands, and above all in the cheerful and sparkling expanse of clean, free, tidal water about her. She knew the sheer delight of simply sailing under smooth and nearly noiseless power in a craft of her own and going places, as Kit phrased it.

The child had said something about escape, was it ? Let it be so ; the moment was here to seize and gather to the heart. Ness's eyes filled embarrassingly with tears of joy as she sat in the cockpit of the *Dulcibelle* with Mr. P. Oliphant Pomphrey near at hand, talking at great length and rather grandly of the days when all the great houses along the shores were occupied by gentlemen of means and he had shared the glory departed.

Kit was up with Duggie in the small navigating cabin, eagerly taking instruction in the art of handling a boat under power. . . . Duggie was so good and patient with her, never failing (as men usually did) to applaud her successes. . . . She looked nice in the grey slacks and red pullover with the polo neck . . . It was wonderful that the new specialist in Edinburgh, his services commanded by the Nimmo fortune, had assured them that quite a small operation would remove the need for goggles altogether. . . . The power of money was amazing. And, Lord ! thought Ness, I'm getting almost like Quin in thinking of nearly nothing else.

That cautious citizen sat apart, propped up between the coach-roof of the cabin and the thin wire ropes that sketchily lined the outer edges of the top deck. He was quiet, but the sensitive eyes were alert behind the rimless glasses and his nose twitched as he surveyed the riparian scene ; and Ness chuckled to think that he was no doubt happily engaged in assessing the values of these eligible coastwise properties and considering how they could be developed. Quin on a boat for pleasure presented to her an exquisite study in the ironical improbable.

She thought of herself as a bit of a sight for that matter, a big lump of a middle-ageing woman in blue slacks, but she was firm as to the propriety of the garments, and Duggie, with rude male cluckings and chirrupings at his first sight of her that morning, had been quite frankly flattering about the grace of her figure. But not one of the Nimmo's quite reached Olly's level of sartorial distinction ; here was one most correctly attired for a yachting trip. Out of his Edwardian wardrobe he had unearthed a pair of yellowing flannel trousers of a somewhat narrow cut, a pair of buckskin shoes with tan leather decorations, a double-breasted blazer with brass buttons, and a yachting cap with a shiny and deeply-angled skip : the last only slightly blemished by a dark patch on the band where Olly had once proudly sported the badge of a yacht club regally patronised.

"Isn't he a duck ?" Kit had whispered at the sight of him ; and the dear man did give you the feeling of being in the presence of one who might have drawn the favourable attention of King Edward the Seventh at Cowes in the year of *Shamrock III*. Now he sat in the sternsheets of the *Dulcibelle*,

clearly a happy man, flicking his moustache from time to time and, more occasionally, using his binoculars on passing craft and once-familiar landmarks.

"It's glorious, Mr. Pomphrey, isn't it?" said Ness, driven by sheer happiness down to the nadir of conventional phrasing.

"Magnificent!" he agreed. "Perfect day. And a jolly nice boat, this of yours, Miss Nimmo, if you don't mind me saying so. I rather think Duggie must be making for the Gamekeeper's Bay. Lovely place to anchor for a spot of lunch."

The *Dulcibelle* had crossed the Firth and now, in the still heat over sheltered waters, was surging at a tidy nine knots up a loch that narrowed suddenly and then took to winding like a stream, as if it must lose itself in a tangle of Highland peaks on the 3,000-foot level. The great traffic of the shipping lane up and down the Firth proper was far behind. The straggle of holiday villas along the shores thinned and disappeared. The *Dulcibelle* seemed to have been miraculously transferred to an inland sea of a remoteness only less than perfect on account of, here, a shepherd's cottage and, there, the gaunt architecture of a summer shooting-lodge. The northern divers appeared to be in comic possession of this watery enclave, with a school of porpoises trespassing after herring fry along the eastern shore.

Ness felt herself awed by this lovely remoteness. If she had known conscious happiness before, now she was being enveloped in the perfect peace.

"Thought I was right," Olly interrupted her dream. "The Gamekeeper's Bay it is. We'll be anchoring shortly."

This statement roused Quin into a flutter of anxiety, standing up on the deck and gesturing to indicate his feeling that something decisive should now be done.

"I'd leave it to Duggie and Kit, if I were you, Quin," said Olly with a princely calm. "Too many cooks, if you don't mind me saying it, are apt to spoil the broth."

"But we can't leave that child to run the boat!" Quin pleaded, gesticulating, for Duggie had emerged from the wheelhouse and was up in the bows unshackling the anchor. His cool directions, shouted back to the girl at the wheel, had the effect of ruling Quin quite out of court, of relegating him to another and lower sphere of activity.

"Ease her up now, Kit . . . That's the girl ! . . . Steady, steady ! . . . Into neutral and let her run. But for God's dear sake, throttle back ! . . . Good enough . . . Check . . . The pick's going overside now. Attaboy ! Into reverse, Kit, and ever so gently !" Duggie's right hand shot into the air and he belled : "Cut everything !"

The *Dulcibelle* was at rest, snubbing gently against her chain to the mild tug of an ebbing tide. Dug came aft, grinning, a pirate in the red beret of his Service. He put his arm round Kit's waist as she crawled out of the wheelhouse.

"Well done, Kit ! You'll be running a DUKW in the next war." He addressed the company in the cockpit. "How's that for a bit of navigation ? This kid can fairly handle a boat, or is anybody arguing about it ?"

"Well done indeed, Kit !" cried Olly generously. "Got the whole business to a T first go, upon my Sam !"

This praise of Kit and the girl's patent delight in it made Ness feel happier than ever, and now the scene about her was all the lovelier on that account.

But for the shell of a white cottage among the small oak and hazel ashore you could believe that nobody had ever been here before. The mild crescent of the Gamekeeper's Bay was marked by smooth grey rocks, tufted with sea pinks and mottled with golden lichen, except where, before the ruined cottage, a bank of golden sand had formed about the estuary of a small brown stream from off the hills behind. Where the last of the gamekeepers' cow had no doubt browsed heavily, where perhaps a garden had once been cultivated, there was a growth of rushes with orchis and water avens and centaury and tormentil flourishing among them in decorous colour. From those reedy places and from clumps of bog myrtle among the crimped small trees there drifted out to the *Dulcibelle* at rest a subtle, rooty perfume, borne on a mere eddy of air from the west.

"What a place for a picnic !" cried Kit. "Can't we go ashore ?"

"After lunch, dear," Ness demurred. "I want to use that galley stove to heat things."

"You mean, you want to play with it," her sister laughed.

"What I was going to suggest," said Olly with the gravity of one who has devoted thought to an important subject, "is that we should crack one of the bottles of bubbly and christen the ship, so to speak."

"That's talking," applauded Duggie.

Everybody, indeed, thought the idea wonderful, and Ness was proud to reveal how the tiny frig in the galley had kept the wine cool and how cunningly she had packed glasses in soft cloths, sentimentally anticipating a moment like this. Olly handled the foil and the wire with loving expertise. A cork popped (though quite probably not for the first time) in the peace of the Gamekeeper's Bay. The wine poured briskly into the outstretched glasses.

"I think," said Olly after a slightly awkward pause, "I think we should drink simply to the *Dulcibelle*, and may good fortune attend all who sail in her!"

This agreeable sentiment was unanimously approved and, indeed, greeted by Ness with another unstoppable flow of the tears of gratitude. This, however, was noticed only by Kit, who whispered: "Don't bubble, for the Lord's sake, or you'll have me roaring like a kid with a pin in its nappie!" Ness was able to laugh immediately, and rose, saying in her most businesslike way:

"Now I'll get the lunch ready. Kit, if you and Dug want to go ashore, go now and don't be more than twenty minutes. Quin, please collect the glasses and bring them through to the galley."

She was proud of that lunch; she had taken much care with its planning, spending as much money as, a month before, she would have spent on a week's provisions for the attic flat in Stornoway Street. A great carton of Russian salad, a huge lettuce, a jar of real *pâté*, a fresh brown loaf and delectable pastes. (And how wonderfully obliging were shopkeepers towards those with the money!) Then her own service of hot dogs, proving the little grill in the galley to be delightfully efficient; tinned peaches or wheaten biscuits and cheese, coffee hot and strong.

"Yum!" grunted Duggie, making Chinese motions of appreciation, his open hand riding the bounds of his digestive tract. "The best food in years, Ness."

"Delicious!" Olly supported him, bowing briefly towards his hostess. "Fit for a king."

"Well, it's a special occasion," declared Ness, flattered and flustered. "We won't be able to run to this every trip, I'm afraid. The points I blew in Crabbie's yesterday! And we've all got a special edge on our appetites, after all."

"Not at all!" Olly insisted. "Never had a picnic lunch like it. I'll thank you for the potted shrimps, Quin."

Ah, this happiness! Was it just to be able to give pleasure to others and share it with them? Or was it only a woman's profound satisfaction in doing what she wanted to do for her own people and being praised for the doing?

Nor did a woman ever need to worry about the scrubby aftermath of eating when Duggie was about. Ness had vaguely planned that the dirty plates and things would be put back in the hamper and taken home for careful washing and drying. Dug laughed at that. He dived into the fo'c'sle and reappeared with a net, into which he cheerfully placed all the soiled dishes. Two or three deft twists, and the bag thus created was hanging overside in the green water.

"The tide'll scour all the crumbs and fat away," he said. "It's only a matter of rinsing and drying when we get home."

As Dug was speaking, Quin was helping in his own way by throwing empty tins and cartons over the stern.

"Hey, there, you ruddy landlubber!" Duggie turned to abuse him. "That's stuff to be taken ashore and buried or burned. Don't start being a litter-lout, even if you're at sea."

He deftly collected the shards of the feast into a pail, while Kit folded squares of greased paper and Ness returned the balance of foodstuffs to the hamper. Quin sat down in a huff. Olly rolled a cigarette but looked as if he might fall asleep at any moment. Dug leapt to the upper deck in one spring on sandshoed feet.

"Give me a kick in twenty minutes, Ness, will you? I'm just going to have a spot of zizz. Kit and I are going bathing afterwards."

He lay down on the bare planks, placed his red beret over his face, and passed immediately into the healthy slumber that young men learn to enjoy at any moment in H.M. Services.

“ My *Glasgow Herald* is in the cabin. I think I’ll get out of the sun for a bit.” That was Quin.

Olly’s head nodded ; the ginger moustache fell to the lapel of the worn reefer jacket ; he was elderly and pathetic and feckless in a trice. Kit winked at Ness and anon curled up on one of the hard rexine cushions in the cockpit : not to sleep, indeed ; rather to enjoy this bliss of warmth and beauty and to anticipate the near moment of plunging into the cold sea with her favourite brother. Ness worked her new Ronson with the slightly excessive vehemence of the female in mechanical matters and drew in the first bland, inhaled draught of a *Perfecto Fino*—she who had counted the common or garden Player’s a luxury for years on end.

She watched the tide drifting past the yacht’s side, slow but implacable. She saw how it carried all sorts of tiny and important things : small weeds and animalculæ on miniature rafts of sand particles ; always moving, always working. She smiled, drowsing like the rest of the ship’s company. This was to think how, in a boat, the personalities and positions of Quin and Duggie were reversed. Here Duggie, the lazy and useless one in ordinary life, emerged commanding and efficient, while Quin, the master of civil ratiocination, was revealed to be feckless and timid. That was another little satisfaction, if a malicious one, of this perfect day.

She did not need to waken Duggie. At the touch of some subconscious mechanism he stirred almost on the tick of the twenty-first minute, sat up and bellowed : “ Hoi, Kit ! What about that bathe now ? ”

They all went ashore, rowed with ferocity by Duggie in two dinghy-loads, Ness primly but proudly carrying the bathing things in a bright new plastic bag, with biscuits she felt sure the children would need when they came out of the water. Olly carried a rug and chose a resting-place for Ness and himself on a shelf of rock above the sandy beach. Kit and Duggie disappeared at different angles into the hinterland. Quin considered the edge of the tide for a measurable space of time and was then to be seen taking off shoes and socks and rolling his grey flannel trousers up to the knee.

He was tentatively paddling in some six inches of water, looking uncommonly like a member of the rodent family dis-

tinctly out of its element, when with a great whooping the bathers came bounding across the marshy piece before the ruined cottage hand in hand and dashed into the salt with the shouts and screams proper to such occasions. Ness could have cried out with joy, so perfectly lovely in its own genre was the picture presented by these happy creatures—the rounded graces of the girl in a bright blue costume ; the brown, black-haired, strong figure of the man in maroon trunks. It was funny to see Quin draw back primly as they splashed past him, for all the world like an old lady pulling her skirts round her in a shower of mud-drops from a passing bus.

The swimmers breasted deeper and deeper into the water, and then Ness alarmingly recalled that the loch was notoriously one of the deepest in West Scotland. You had only to look at the slope of the guardian hills to realise with what alarming precipitance the rocks beyond that meagre strip of sand must shelve down to the glooming deeps. She wanted to cry out a caution, but restrained herself with an effort, and then she was suddenly alarmed by a detached remark from Olly at her elbow.

“ They’re off now,” he announced.

Ness thought him to suggest that Kit and Dug were off on some mad exploit in the water, but they were in fact still within depth, engaged in the ancient game of splashing each other. She turned to see Mr. Pomphrey gravely regarding the face of his gold watch.

“ The runners in the Derby, I mean,” he amplified his statement. “ If we had a wireless set here we’d know the winner in a jiffy.”

“ Oh, I hope it’s Airborne ! I wonder when we’ll know ? ”

“ As a matter of fact, Miss Nimmo, I had an idea about that. I thought of suggesting when the young people have finished their bathe, we might run quietly down the loch and have tea in the Marine at Hamilton’s Quay. Jolly nice pub ; headquarters of the Royal Firth, of course. All sorts of chappies there will know the result and the prices.”

“ That’s a good idea. . . . Oh dear ! Just look at these two lunatics.”

The bathers had swum out to where the *Dulcibelle* lay placidly at anchor. Kit had gripped the little ladder over the

quarter, and Duggie was punting her up. Then they were both climbing forward to poise on the highest edge of the upper deck, their hands raised to dive.

"Kit!" cried Ness in sharp alarm.

She might as well have fired a pistol to start the race. Two forms streaked into the water and left the *Dulcibelle* heaving mildly on a glassy sea. Anon they came pounding shorewards, a froth and flurry where Duggie sped almost under water in the crawl, an arching of female arms in the trudgeon, more graceful than effective. The brother was on dry land as the sister ploughed through the shallows.

"Beat you by yards, kid!" he cried, and she shrieked with delight as his open hand smacked on her wet bottom. Both of them ran for towels and clothes.

"Wonderful pals, these two," said Olly. "Nice to see them so happy."

That silly word—nice. They were beautiful in their youth and strength and trust. They were a great part of the beauty of a day Ness was to remember all the days of her life, often to go over in detail, minute by minute, when the winds blew cold.

"I feel," said Quin, coming up behind Ness and the paying guest, "we have rather exhausted the interest of this part of the world. Don't you think we might move somewhere livelier?"

"We're just going down to the Marine at Hamilton's Quay for tea. Won't be long now."

Ness spoke patiently. She was feeling a little sorry for Quin, bored by the simple, like a disgruntled guest at a garden party who has communed with the cabbages and has still not been missed. She watched with interest how, when they were all in the *Dulcibelle* again, and Kit was climbing to the place at the wheel as by right, he put in an acidulous claim for notice.

"I really think I might have a shot at running the boat."

"Sorry, Quin!" Kit paused on the edge of the cockpit. She added sincerely, slipping down again: "It's terrific fun. You'll like it."

"Come on then, brother," Duggie said heartily. "Into the fighting-top and we'll show you the works. But none of

your ruddy theories, now, or you'll go overside with the gash."

Quin's conduct of the vessel down the loch again seemed to Ness exemplary. She was encouraged to believe that she could herself qualify in steersmanship. This faith was strengthened when, after half an hour at the wheel, Quin relinquished it to Kit and moved cautiously aft to the cockpit.

"There's nothing in it," he dismissed the art of navigation.

"On a day like this, no," Olly agreed with unconscious irony. "It's quite another business when you're trying to pick up moorings with a snorter coming up from the south-west."

The *Dulcibelle* approached the stretches of the Firth proper, the heroic view of the islands and the desert of seas beyond them opening up, unrolling like a tapestry as she emerged from the enchanted loch. The Gamekeeper's Bay was far behind now: a memory, the immemorial fragment of a dream. The coastal villas of an industrial civilisation were about them again. The ship slowed down in the shadow of a great hotel in the Regency style, its bulk dominating a steamboat pier and a concrete jetty. Duggie rowed Ness and Olly ashore.

"What was the result of the Derby, chum?" he hailed a yacht hand lounging on the slip.

"A blasted outsider called Airborne. At fifties, too!"

"Good God!" cried Olly.

The people from the *Dulcibelle* stood on the jetty and looked at one another.

"What does that mean?" asked Ness, seeming to be afraid of whatever it might be.

"It means in your case," replied Olly gravely, "a very tidy packet of cash. Let me see . . . Twenty-five at fifties, twelve-fifty; then a quarter—three twelve, ten, I think, Duggie? Fifteen hundred and sixty two pounds ten shillings. And a very nice little win, if you ask me."

"That's impossible!"

"It really isn't, Ness," Duggie grinned darkly. "And you get your stake money back."

"But I don't want it, I don't need it."

"Do we feed it to the fishes, then? Look here, I'd better get out to the yacht and fetch Quin and young Kit. Wait till you see our brother's eyes popping."

Ness was left on the jetty with Mr. Pomphrey. Behind her excitement was a profound sense of guilt; somehow, it shouldn't have happened in the moment of pure happiness. She took the eye of her paying guest.

"It worries me, all that money coming so suddenly, somehow. I feel as if I had stolen it from poor people."

Olly smiled and flicked his moustache upwards. He had the air of one who has brilliantly managed a deal in finance.

"Not at all, Miss Nimmo, I assure you. You see," he said as one announcing a new-found truth, "money makes money. Perfectly simple."

5

The menfolk were all out on their mysterious affairs, and Kit had gone to the tennis courts: all no doubt to convey to their friends their impressions of the opening cruise of the *Dulcibelle*. It was diverting to think of their various attitudes—Kit gushing ecstatically to the other girls; Quin refusing to be enthusiastic but implying a sophisticated superiority of possession and experience. Duggie would talk fifteen to the dozen about engines and revs and things, and dear Olly would be rather like Quin in the aloof confidence of position re-established, but above all vocal on his own prescience in recommending Airborne as the winner of the Derby. It was nice to think that he had won sixty-two pounds ten shillings.

He had been so comically sweet about it all on the way home from Hamilton's Quay across an estuary still bright, but ruffled now by the rising east wind of settled weather. He was a new Olly, rejuvenated by this windfall of ready cash, fortified in pride by his intangible share in the *Dulcibelle*.

Ness perceived the charming irony of his easy passage into the part of the benevolent author of her own fortunes. He had even forgotten that the choice of Airborne had been but a silly whim of her own. Olly's was a delightful figure in the cockpit as he smoked a cigar bought on the strength of his win and sipped the last glass out of the second bottle of

champagne, providentially forgotten until this moment of triumph. In his antique garments he seemed a piece of the Edwardian period come to vivid life again.

"Always had a fancy for that horse," he assured his hostess. "All sorts of people chase after the favourites, but I always look for a good outsider, and when I saw what was what, and then the chappie in the Club giving me the tip quite independently—never asked him for it ; gave me it straight away off his own bat—then I put two and two together ; and, well, you see . . ."

He made a grand gesture with the cigar in his hand. He did not guess, and never would, that Ness was thinking how simple and self-deceiving and innocent he was. To be sure, she was also thinking how he possessed by natural endowment the goodness and kindness of the true gentleman he so anxiously wished to be in external circumstance.

A great day for Mr. Pomphrey ; but nobody would ever know what a day of joy for herself, Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo. As her face glowed now to the touches of sun and wind, so her spirit was electrified by delight consciously enjoyed. This was what they meant when they said of a person that her heart sang. She was so happy, for once, that she could not pause to analyse the causes of her happiness. She could only go on and on, over and over every moment of the day from the setting out to the coming back, and see in the panorama nothing but cause for thankfulness, from the happiness of her beloved people to her own discovery of one way of escape from the tyranny of the close and the tenement. The spell of the peace in the Gamekeeper's Bay held her in thrall ; she thought of it now as a sacred place. There, for a moment in time, she had been out of the world. Turning over a pile of bed-linen in the attic sewing-room, she idly wondered if the old gamekeeper's cottage could be bought and restored for summer living.

She was happy enough in the housewifely task that now engaged her immediate interest. Indeed, she found herself singing, and then stopped to wonder what old air it was that had come back into her mind. Not for years, she was sure, had she thought of or rehearsed this tune, a light little thing in waltz time, in the manner of a serenade. It came from away back in time, perhaps from an early stage of happiness ;

she must have heard it from her father, Wee Captain Slocum, who was given to serious tenor solos.

*Hear, lady, hear, thy lover sighing
To thee to-night . . .*

It was strange that the words should return across the wastes of time and subconscious memory. Then she had it, envisaging clearly the faded title-page of a thin folio of sheet music ; "Hörch, Liebchen, hörch !" —Serenade from Flotow's admired opera of *Stradella*. But why the return of the faded tune in this moment of time ? Could it be that Captain Slocum had come to speak to her when she had at last realised his own private dream ?

She was a romantic old fool, blown up with the pride of money. Look at the bed-linen of the Nimmo household, the miserable debris of years of impoverishment ! Thin sheets and pillow-cases with ugly square patches on them like clumsy mends on a much-punctured inner tube. Double sheets cut and hemmed to fit single beds, and short at that. You could poke a forefinger through most of the stuff and rip it end to end. Shabby, patched quilts with the stuffing most miserably depressed and deflated. Look at the worn carpets, the mangy doormats ; think only of the state of the men's wardrobes—Duggie's small collection of split pyjama jackets and horny, darned socks would break your heart. It was not the war and the coupons. It was the running down of an economy.

Now you had the money but not the coupons. You were doomed to shabbiness. But if you were to pool all the coupons in all the five books, and make an exact reckoning of the basic needs of the men and then of the household, you could . . . But that would mean persuading Quin to surrender his clothing book, and he could never see why he should be asked to give up the least of what he called his rights. Still, it was lovely to know that the money was there to give the power to buy, two thousand pounds of it fantastically out of the pace or stamina or luck of a racehorse.

But all that was still nothing to the loveliness of the hours in the Gamekeeper's Bay. Ness moved from the old chest of drawers to the dormer window and looked across the Firth,

darkling now, with the easterly wind whipping the anchorage to a grey and submissive monotony. The hills on the other side of the water were knobbly and hard against the clear light of the afterglow. Beyond the first tier of them was the bay, still peopled in her mind by Duggie in his maroon trunks and Kit in her bright blue costume, by the small trees and the wild flowers, by the living particles of sand floating under the counter of the *Dulcibelle*. Such were the strange ingredients of happiness.

She started to the noise of the front-door bell. Who could it be at this time of night? She went downstairs and opened the door cautiously.

It was old Mrs. Merriweather, breathless and in tears but still anxious to apologise for the intrusion. She was so sorry, dear Miss Nimmo, at this time of the night, putting her troubles on other people, but she was alone with fear, utterly bound now by loneliness. John, the last frail bit of treasure left to her, was taken ill, in pain. She could not leave him, nor could she do aught to help him. She stood on the threshold of a strange woman's home and made the last surrender of pride and individuality.

Ness embraced her, patted her back, kissed the wrinkled, wet cheek, and then became mistress of herself and the situation. The trivial act of appearing to do something was not so much helpful to the suffering and afraid as the salve of one's own conscience. Old John Merriweather was going to die, of course, but what was there to do but rush to the aid of the old woman and give her such small comfort as she could now expect of her remaining span of life?

"Now, now, Mrs. Merriweather!" she heard herself speaking like a schoolmarm. "It'll be all right. We'll get the doctor. I'll run up the road for Dr. Cullen."

As she led the old lady downstairs, she heard Kit whistling on her way upstairs. They met on the second landing, and Ness was quick to still the girl's questioning.

"Kit, run as fast as you can and get Dr. Cullen. Mr. Merriweather's badly ill."

It was a blessing to have a sister so quick in her apperceptions as Kit. With a quiet "Oh dear!" the girl turned and bounded downstairs again, a lithe figure in white blouse

and brief divided skirt: the young with a seemingly interminable expectation of life leaping to bring succour to one who, useless by all ordinary calculations, had only hours of painful or bemused existence before him.

Ness had to sit in a shabby old bedroom with a stricken old woman and a sick thing that groaned terribly under a patchwork quilt. The chamber was as empty of interest and vitality as if the oxygen had been purposefully pumped out of it: the secret stronghold of one pride of indigent gentility about to be abandoned. Ness sat listening to the occasional convulsive sob of the old woman and held the lean, hard-skinned hands between her own. She moved once or twice to stoop over the old man, to rearrange the patchwork quilt, but only to realise there was nothing within her power to reduce the agony that drew the unshaven upper lip back in a sort of snarl.

Kit, the sensible girl, knocked at the door instead of sending the old bells on their coiled springs clanging in the kitchen.

"Dr. Cullen's up at the Golf Club. They're sending for him."

"Right. Go upstairs and make yourself some supper. But don't wait up for me. I may be here till all hours." Leave a note for the boys if they're not back before you go to bed."

It was an hour before Dr. Cullen came, smelling of the Saturday evening whisky-and-sodas he allowed himself. Mrs. Merriweather and Ness retired to a chill and odorous kitchen.

"I'm sure the doctor will know what's the trouble," the old lady said, thinly bidding for Ness's support.

"I'm sure he will," Ness returned, but in the manner of the professional helper. "We'll just have to be patient. Now, dear, now . . ."

Dr. Cullen's broad round face, slightly mottled and moustachioed in the R.A.M.C. manner, appeared round the edge of the kitchen door.

"Could I see you for a moment, Miss Nimmo?"

"But how is my husband? I must know how John is keeping."

"He's all right, Mrs. Merriweather, quite all right. Just sit quiet for a minute." The professional technique, thought

Ness, was quite remarkably efficient. "But if I could just have one word with Miss Nimmo . . ."

He led Ness into the dim sitting-room, muttering as he lit a cigarette.

"There's very little hope, you know. It's a stoppage, practically fatal at his age."

"An operation?"

"Oh, I suppose one of the young chaps at the infirmary would have a stab at it!" He added bitterly: "He'd probably regard it as good practice on a poor old beggar beyond hope."

"No! I couldn't tolerate that."

The doctor raised his eyebrows, then remembered the new authority conferred on this still handsome woman by her fortune.

"No, Dr. Cullen," Ness went on. "These poor old people have had very little in their lives, but they're gentlefolk. A little kindness . . . I want you to put him in the nursing home and get the best man down from Glasgow. I'll be responsible."

Dr. Cullen raised his eyebrows again, but his well-developed sense of professional advantage was stronger than his cynicism.

"I can arrange that, of course. It's very generous of you, Miss Nimmo. Let me see now. I'll have to run to the house for a phone. If I can get Pettigrew-Lodge or Charlie Renwick at home . . . Let me see now. The ambulance and the theatre. Might manage it by midnight. It'll take some organising. Will you break it to the old lady?"

He turned to hurry out, but then turned back to Ness, feeling in his pocket for a leather case of drugs. He dropped three small white tablets into her hand.

"Get the old girl to swallow one of these at once. If it doesn't calm her down, give her another about midnight. And so on."

John Clink Merriweather died some eight hours later of operational shock as Dr. Gordon Cullen, Mr. Vere Pettigrew-Lodge and Agnessa Nimmo were all fairly sure he would, thus demonstrating one ineluctable limitation of the power of money. Ness locked the door of the second flat left and climbed wearily to her own above it. Kit was busy with the Sunday morning breakfast.

"Well, that was a night!" Ness said, slumping into the basket-chair. "It seems a year ago since we were all so happy in the *Dulcibelle*. The poor old man died at six this morning."

"What have they done with Mrs. Merriweather?"

"Oh, that was the pity of it! Tears, and patting her hand, trying to reason with her—just like handling a frightened child—till the drug the doctor gave me quietened her down. But I just had to sit there and kick myself awake, watching her. It seemed a terribly long night, something that happened long ago. But we got her into the Medical Aid Home this morning. She doesn't understand, but they'll look after her."

Ness yawned, and Kit dexterously transferred a kipper from the frying-pan to a plate under the grill.

"You're a marvel, Ness," she said, trying to appear detached. "It's a pity, but I'm glad you saved it all from humiliation. My God!" she burst out, "aren't poverty and pride and old age the bloodiest combination!"

"Kit!"

"All right. Only blowing off steam. And as for you, Ness Nimmo, it's bed once you've had a bite of food. Dug and I'll manage."

"What I want now is a cup of hot, strong tea. And don't let me hear you using language like that again! I can't stand a woman swearing."

One by one the men came in to hear the story. Olly thought that Miss Nimmo had been dashed kind as usual—if he might be allowed to say so—and that what could in decency have been done had, in fact, been properly done. Duggie simply said: "Good old Ness, always on the bell!" Quin demurred, with caution now.

"I can quite appreciate your instinct, Ness," he said, "but I do think you might have paused to reflect that the infirmary is there for people in that position; and, for that matter, that all these services are going to be nationalised anyhow. The old chap's case must have been hopeless from the beginning, and I bet you Cullen knew it."

"Oh, Quin, Quin!" Ness almost wailed. "Will you never understand? Look! Yesterday I won more than two thousand pounds in a gamble, and I suppose the operation will cost me, what? Not more than two hundred. And if it

had cost me the whole of the two thousand, it would still be worth it to me. Just giving a little comfort, being kind for a moment. There's not an awful lot of kindness about in this world."

She sighed again with weariness. Quin said nothing, nor did any of the others venture a comment. Kit handed Ness a cup of tea.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMER HOLIDAY

I

THE FARM steadying stood boldly on the hillside above the hamlet's decrepit pier, its whitewashed front most insidiously picturesque beside the intense deep green of the old sycamores that protected it on the west. From the rough shore road there wound up towards the house a cart-track, which corkscrewed about the steep slope with the charm of a fanciful design on a Christmas card. You could see from the water that the place was tidily kept : the whitewash gleaming in the sunlight, the paintwork freshly green, the wire fence taut about the little rough lawn before the house. A white garden seat against a fan of escallonia by a diminutive porch completed a grouping that, in the West Highland setting, possessed a ravishing quality of the exotic.

Seeing the place for the first time after many years—fully twenty-five, it must be, Ness reflected—she had the emotions of one who, at the bottom of a drawer, comes on a treasure of childhood. She had quite forgotten the dream, but an intense and passionate dream it had been. Wee Captain Slocum had taken her for a sail, and as the pleasure steamer passed up the kyle, the five-piece band playing "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and the bars below doing a roaring trade, she had first seen the farm above the pier and fallen in love with it.

It was a house in a fairy tale, she had come firmly to believe : the real house of one of her story-books. She used to think of it before she fell asleep ; she made up her own stories about it, with herself and all sorts of animals doing all sorts of romantic and enchanting things in and about it. Now she thought sentimentally of the poor little town girl, permitted a moment of escape on a third-class half excursion

ticket, price ninepence or thereabouts, carried by the railway company inexorably back to the hard pavements and tall, dark tenements of Garvel.

Then, how wonderful it was that the power she commanded through the fortune and its expression in the *Dulcibelle* could return her to the scene at almost any moment she chose ! The moment of rediscovery was so exciting. She and Kit and Duggie had the *Dulcibelle* to themselves this Saturday.

It was Kit's day after the travail of the bursary examinations, and she had been allowed to choose where they would go. As the girl, rapt at the wheel, steered the ship down the Firth and towards the mouth of a narrow arm of the sea, Ness had turned anxiously to Dug and asked him where on earth the child thought she was going, and he had said in his lazy, teasing way :

"The kid's just going places, Ness. Trust in God and the Highland skipper."

Ness had felt excited from the moment the boat entered the narrow strait between mainland and island, as if she were destined to make a lovely rediscovery of something lost long since. She had felt herself returning to the province of a dream ; the yellow-washed mansion-house on the point, the bare little church on the shore, and even the hulk of a coal gabbart rotting beside a group of derelict frames on which the fishermen of another generation had once dried their nets . . . all were mysteriously familiar. Then an inner arm of the kyle had suddenly opened up round a point, and there was the farmhouse cocked up on the brow of the hill ahead, the pier now completely derelict, and a covey of cruising yachts at anchor and moorings almost under the trees that edged a cosy bay to high-water mark.

The scene surprised Kit immediately.

"Oh, Ness, look ! Isn't that lovely ? See the dinky little farm on the hill. I'd love to live there."

"That's what I used to think myself, Kit," Ness responded softly. "It was rather a dream in fact. I used to make up stories."

"Well, let's stop here for lunch and make up another story. It's a perfectly wizard place," and the girl skipped up to the wheelhouse to tell Duggie that the lady they now

tolerantly called the Owner desired to cast anchor and eat in the peace of what the chart identified as Milton Bay.

"I'll bet you the poet never got this length," Kit said in her clever way, and Duggie pretended to throttle her and with mock grimness advised her not to come the Quin on him. He added his own rough pun: "It's a gargle you'll need before I'm finished with you."

They all laughed at these trivialities, so pleasant within the easy understanding of two sisters and a lazily tolerant brother, and then they went ashore together in that drowsy inward curve of a summer afternoon when the heat hangs heavy over dusty roads and all but the very young are impelled to sleep. They bought picture postcards and stamps in a post office-cum-general store that smelt richly of ham and firewood. The middle-aged woman behind the counter was dark, untidy, cautious in the Highland way.

"What will that be, then?" Ness asked.

"That'll be, let me see, one and tippence. You'll be here for a holiday?"

"Only for a day in the boat. But I'd like to live in the farmhouse up on the hill there," Ness laughed.

"Ardmillan! Now, isn't that a strange thing? Mrs. Mackenzie herself was in here not twenty minutes past, telling me she's had a disappointment with her August let. Glasgow folks that have been coming here ever since the children were small. A Mr. Barclay in the meat trade; you'll maybe know him; a nice gentleman, though I'm saying nothing about the mistress."

"And the place is really free now?"

"I tell you, Mrs. Mackenzie was in here with the advertisement for the *Herald* in her hand and wanting a stamp."

Ness searched the faces of her brother and sister, really looking for the stimulus that would give her confidence. In Kit's she saw the prayerful and passionate desire that this glimpse of paradise might not be darkened before her eyes.

"Oh, Ness! If we only could . . ." she breathed.

"You, Dug?"

"Okay by me. And if anybody ever had luck, it's you, my sweet sister."

"Well," announced Ness cautiously, "we can at least go up and look at the place."

The matter was arranged within twenty minutes. Mrs. Mackenzie, though a gaunt and reserved woman, careful to explain that the summer letting of Ardmillan never amounted to a problem, exclaimed that never before in this context had such a coincidence come her way. Not three hours since she had had Mr. Barclay's letter, not an hour since she had posted hers to the *Herald*, and here was Miss Nimmo on her doorstep ! It was a wonderful world indeed.

Ness conventionally went over the house, allotting the rooms in her mind. It would have had to be in a sorry state before she could have refused it, but if plainly furnished it was clean, a flavour as of southernwood and peat commingled in every room.

"And if you were wanting help, there's Agnes, the shepherd's daughter, for daily work. She was in the A.T.S., you know, a good strong girl."

"I'll take the house with pleasure, Mrs. Mackenzie, and I'll write to-night to confirm it. I can give you references."

Mrs. Mackenzie smiled. "I doubt if I need references from a young lady with a fine fortune like yours."

"Oh dear ! I thought I'd get away from that here."

"You can never get away from money in this world, Miss Nimmo. But our folk hereabouts are Highland, and they'll not annoy you."

Ness and Kit paused at the gate that gave from the path across the rough lawn on to the winding track. The place so seemed to hang over the kyle that you felt, quite mistakenly, a boy could throw a stone to near where the *Dulcibelle* rested in the little bay below. The whole length of the waterway from where it branched off the Firth to where it turned round the end of the island through a tangle of rocky islets was under command from this elevated place.

"It's not like the Gamekeeper's Bay at all," said Kit, "not so sweet and mysterious. It's lovely in another way, somehow—nobler, stronger—oh, dash it ! What's the word—more triumphant."

That was the right word, Ness agreed in her mind. Her luck had been triumphant ; her sense of happiness in all her

new gains and possessions of the same order of experience. She knew the feeling with conscious immediacy as the *Dulcibelle* took them home up the glowing Firth in the early evening and she rehearsed how they would tell Olly and Quin of their surprising discovery of the farmhouse on the hill above Milton Bay.

The wind was north-easterly, whipping up the seas round the Riccar Light and sending little scuds of spray into the cockpit. Ness found herself shivering, and when she went into the cabin to get herself a heavy coat, she became aware of a change in her mood. It seemed to have come upon her as subtly as the slight physical discomfort. She curled up in a corner of her own berth, wrapped the coat about her legs and took to thinking sombrely.

The Godenzis, even of her mother's generation, had been backsliders from Holy Church, and though Wee Captain Slocum had been no churchman, he had put upon his first-born at least the stern philosophy of his Covenanting forebears. You knew your place in his sort of society, and you were proud of it but humble. You could be happy and even jolly, but with decorum and a sense of ultimate responsibility. Above all, you must guard against the sin of self-indulgence.

Ness did not know that these teachings dwelt with her, but now, as she reclined in the cabin of her own ship, the sense of sin worked upon her. Her taking of the house had been a preposterous and greedy caprice. Ingenuously enough she saw herself as blown with the pride of money, careless and self-indulgent—too triumphant of mind, in Kit's word—while such as old Mrs. Merriweather dithered towards an obscure end in the Medical Aid Home and decent men like Andrew Buchan saw their private lives falling apart as decent women like Janet Buchan were overtaken by the whips and scorpions. Spending money right and left on mere pleasure, on any passing whim. She was startled by Kit's sudden entry. The girl, unerringly apperceptive, asked sharply :

“What's wrong, Ness? Feeling ill?”

“No, dear. Just thinking.”

“That's what I was thinking. Well, don't think for a bit.”

Somewhat obviously, Kit started to clear and pack up the picnic things, the rugs and the papers.

"You've had far too much of it—I mean thinking. At least fifteen years of it, bringing up characters like me and Dug and Quin, not to mention Bambi. Can't you give yourself just a year's holiday from thinking?"

This was better. The girl's premature gravity was amusing, comforting.

"Never have moods of your own, Kit?" Ness asked lightly enough.

"Moods! I've got one on me now. It's simply the awful notion that I'm not going to get any bursary, and that I don't deserve all this."

"I was feeling that way about myself," confided Ness. "When do the results come out?"

"We'll know the worst on Tuesday. You'll have to get up early and read the *Herald* for me. I won't be able to hold the dashed thing for shuddering."

She peeped through a porthole and cried:

"Oh crums, there's Kempock Pier! I'd better skip up and get the boat-hook or Dug'll be bawling the house down."

Kit did the breaking of the news to Olly and Quin, waiting at home for supper, the latter inclined to be critical of delay; seven o'clock was seven o'clock, as he understood, and not ten past. The girl's bubbling account of how they had found a house for the holidays swept his demurrers aside. With a good deal of relief, Ness perceived that her impulse was generally approved.

Olly said he would look forward to the holiday. He knew Milton Bay like the back of his hand, remembered the farm perfectly, used to enjoy going up for the milk from his father's yacht when a nipper, only so high. In his time the bay would be packed with yachts; could walk dashed nearly from the mainland to the island shore, deck to deck; might be half a dozen whacking great steam yachts in at once, each with its owner's personal piper blowing his blessed soul out on the fo'c'sle every evening. Never see anything like it nowadays; or ever again, for that matter, Olly opined.

Quin said he could do with a quiet holiday after a very worrying time, but hoped that Ness had quite satisfied herself as to the sanitation of this farmhouse. Some of these Highland places were hotbeds of T.B. Well, if that was all right, there

was still going to be some difficulty about travelling. He could only manage a fortnight completely free and week-ends thereafter.

"You can go into Blackwood's, can't you?" said Ness sharply, adding with some feeling: "You can surely afford that now."

"Quin," said Duggie with menace, "if we've ruddy well got to charter the *Queen Elizabeth*, we'll get you to the home-from-home somehow and back again. It isn't such a hellish big problem of logistics. And, I say, Ness, I'm hungry."

"Yes," she agreed quickly. "I'm afraid it's only a cold supper to-night. Kit, dear, will you lay the table and put the kettle on? I must run and change."

She was still uneasy about those slacks of hers. In the *Dulcibelle* they were the very shield of her sense of fitness; among the menfolk in the familiar flat she felt they made of herself a vain and pretentious old fool. She always wanted to run up Stornoway Street and into the close, thinking of such as the Misses McJannet leering from the bow-window of their exhausted drawing-room. She should be strong and bold about it, but that was not in her.

Advancing to the dressing-table, she found that she still held in her hand a small bundle of letters she had picked up from the tarnished salver on the hallstand in the dark lobby. Somewhat impatiently she tore the envelopes open and skimmed the sense of each communication.

Since she had taken back from Quin the task of dealing with her letters, now that he had stemmed the first roaring torrent of them—sometimes brutally, sometimes primly, always efficiently—Ness had learned a great deal about the curious nature of correspondence among strangers.

She was sensitive now to the differences of significance between tuppence-ha'penny and penny stamps, though she had also discovered that the subtler beggars, even on the large scale, deemed it expedient to pay the higher rate of postage and thus acquire the air of responsibility. She had come to know the peculiar quality of the prose which, prepared by an expert in these matters and signed as his own by a person of title, winsomely advanced the claims of remote charities in and about London. She was invited to subscribe to the causes of

Temperance, Social Service, the cures of Cancer, Tuberculosis and Venereal Disease, to Dumb Friends, the Humane Trapping of Fur-Bearing Animals, Vegetarianism, Anti-Vivisection, Missions to the Heathen, and so on to those of small East End football clubs that sadly needed funds and strips and would eagerly name themselves the Nimmo Rovers in return.

Ness liked the human and simple appeals. Her spirit responded to every one of them and was only curbed by her remembrance of what Quin called "the overall picture," of Mr. Gordon's sour distinction as between capital and income. She was even vaguely sorry for those mad folk who wrote her letters of jealous abuse, and she never failed to respond to the other pitiful spirits who, enclosing betting slips (but rarely a reply-paid envelope), implored her to kiss the missive and thus endow it with her blessed luck. This post, however, brought something quite new and horrible with it.

It was as if a handful of filth had been thrown in her face. The thing put a smear across her vision of life. Even if her brain assured her that such dirt assuredly came out of lunacy, she felt it must cling to her senses for ever as the smell to a house with bad drains : pervasive, inescapable. And, crude as it was, the accusation pierced like the thrust of a rapier to that point of living in which she was most vulnerable.

This rag of sneering accusation, badly typewritten but on paper of fair quality, was the work of one familiar with the external circumstances of her life at least. Olly and Andrew Buchan, it seemed, were her companions in sins described in short, ugly words. She kept her men on the wages of sin, which is death. Pride went before a fall, and that would come soon and with horrible humiliations. The phrasing was messianic, but the gist of the message came on a rancid gust of hate, like the stench of cats and pipeclay wafted up the tenement stairs when a door was opened.

One burned this sort of thing and forgot it. Burnt it would be as soon as Ness could smuggle it down to the kitchen. But forget ? The sensible housekeeping woman in her was wholly unnerved. She felt sick with shock and had to sit down. This was a judgment. Her mood in the *Dulcibelle* coming up the Firth had been prophetic ; her taking of Ardmillan had been

a sin of self-indulgence. It seemed a crisis when she heard Kit's voice calling musically :

"Supper's ready. Come along, everybody !"

Ness rose and went to the door, crying : "Kit ! Can you come here a moment ?"

She had to brace herself to face the girl's shrewd look.

"I don't feel like supper to-night. I think I must have caught a chill in the boat."

"You look ghastly," her sister agreed, but again with that look which always seemed about to penetrate Ness's defences. "Get into bed, and I'll give the men their supper first. I'll bring you a cup of tea afterwards."

"Nonsense !" Ness protested, her sense of expedience reviving. "I just don't feel like eating, that's all. In fact, I promised Mr. Buchan to go down and sit with his wife for an hour to-night ; it's not often he gets a night on the bowling green. I'll be perfectly all right, and don't start making a fuss about nothing."

"No. All right."

Kit's manner was abrupt, her glance as she left the room searching and accusative. Ness was left with the feeling that she had somehow, clumsily, betrayed her own confusion. But what a confusion it was—the easy triumph at the farmhouse on the brow of the hill above Milton Bay, and now the humiliation that smeared the picture ! She thought she could never decide whether to write and say she could not take Ardmillan after all, or to be hungry for the immediate escape it offered from No. 20 Stornoway Street and the horrible things that kept creeping up the close. She was sure now it was a judgment on her for the sin of pride.

2

She was abrupt with the others under her private stresses. It was easiest to confine her lacerated feelings behind the mask of the brisk, harassed housewife recovering from a squeamish turn.

She told Kit not to be silly and to go away and change for tennis . . . as if she couldn't make herself a fresh cup of tea

and wash the dishes ! Making a fuss about nothing . . . as if a headache now and again was out of the way !

“ Nothing ? ” asked Kit in her driest tone. “ Oh, all right ! ”

Olly was deeply concerned to hear of Miss Nimmo's indisposition but was ready to explain, with historical references, that if you got nobbled by an evening breeze on the Firth and everything inside not working quite up to scratch, then you could pretty well depend on a bad go of liver. For himself, if he might say so, a half-grain of calomel last thing did the trick. Otherwise, if the others wanted to go out, he would be delighted to stay behind and let his hostess rest or, if she felt that way, enjoy a game of bezique, draughts, halma : anything she cared to mention. Ness thanked him sincerely but sped him on his way to the Club, saying that Kit was apt to make an awful fuss about nothing.

Quin was to be heard making a good deal of noise with a strop and running water in the bathroom, over a period so prolonged that Kit, in shorts, waving her racket round the kitchen door, remarked rudely it was a good thing there was a public lavatory round the corner in the square. He was in his room for a long period, and when he appeared in the kitchen at length he wore his best suit, a fresh collar and a new tie ; on his head was a soft felt hat in green, and over his left arm he carried a neatly-folded raincoat.

“ I may be rather late,” he intimated and disappeared.

Duggie was washing up for Ness, singing over the sink the ballad of “ Lilli Marlene.” He turned from the dishes as Quin vanished.

“ That our beloved brother ? Not so hot on washing up as you might hope.”

No, thought Ness ; nor so hot on considering the pains of other people, even if she had substituted a chill for a thrust at the very core of her self-respect.

“ Why the fancy dress ? ” she contrived to ask casually, referring to Quin.

“ Woman. Money. Allee same Big Chief,” responded Dug cheerfully, putting the plates and things back in their right places in the cupboards.

He took a cigarette from his packet of Capstan and placed it nicely between Ness's lips : she sitting in his own favourite

basket-chair. A strike on his utility lighter and they were both smoking comfortably.

"Are you going out, Dug?" she asked, eased by her sense of conscious love for this brother of hers.

"No. I'm going to be busy in here."

"You busy?"

"Yes, me busy. You lent me two thousand quid, didn't you?"

"Well, I must go down and sit with Janet Buchan."

"Must you, or do you really want to?"

Ignoring the oddly shrewd question, Ness rose and left the kitchen, and soon Duggie heard the front door close behind her.

He went through to the dining-room and out of a drawer in the sideboard took a notebook, a pencil and a thin sheaf of loose papers. With these on the bare table before him, he sat down to calculate and plan. The British Legion rooms might ring with laughter and disputation for all the allure they held now for this man with a dream and a purpose supplied by the access of easy money: the balance of Ness's winnings on the horse called Airborne. His notes were set down in a bold round hand, his spelling would have amused Kit.

Aitken's Yard on Monday to hustle the overhaul and delivery of the *West Wind*, the first purchase of Nimmo's Cruises. Bus down the loch to Meikle's to see the three little runabouts with foolproof two-stroke engines in the water. Contact Bill Craig and Dusty Miller, late of the Royal Marines, make them swear to cut the bar-loafing finally and come out on the adventure. Ring Swingli, the Swiss manager of the Marine Hydro Hotel, to confirm the charter for his busy season. Budget for oil, petrol, waste, rope, moorings, insurance and B.O.T. certificates: all sorts of fascinating details.

The dark head, the brains within it working slowly enough but steadily and confidently, moved with the right-and-left motions of the hand that held the pencil. There was a living in it: a living of his own choice and shaping. The faint shudder of a tiller in a good man's hand, the wind in his face. Keep off the booze and kick the pants off Bill and Dusty if ever they showed signs of lingering too long in the Harbour Bar. Pay old Ness her proper whack of interest. Being one's

own boss, sink or swim, and none of Quin's fancy ideas about floating a limited liability company.

Duggie would have laughed loudly if he could have seen his brother at that moment, for Quintin Macneur Nimmo was in fact bending with such elegance as he could command, ready to turn the pages of sheet music, over the shoulder of a sharp-featured young woman who, at a baby grand pianoforte in the drawing-room of a solid sandstone villa called Lindisfarne, was relentlessly singing "I'll Walk Beside You" to her own accompaniment.

Miss Mhairi . . . "It's pronounced 'Vary'; and it's just 'Mary' really," she was wont to explain.

Miss Mhairi Carmichael Sclanders was the only child of a short, dark and rather ominous lady who now, in the background, knitted with ferocity while she toasted before an electric fire the extremely small feet attached to the ends of extremely short and fat legs. This woman, faintly moustachioed, was the relict of "Corky" Sclanders, who had made a nice little packet out of the building trade between the wars and died dramatically of heart failure when the first German bomb dropped on the port of Garvel. This circumstance had conferred on the small family a measure of local prominence. Mhairi had served with the Wrens and, having reached Naples, had done much to fortify the legend.

She was now in the twenty-seventh year of her age. Her nose was as a pennant flaunted between a receding forehead and a receding chin. Her fair-brown hair was expensively dressed; Quin's nostrils conveyed to his understanding the degree of both lavishness and care that had gone to the application of her cosmetics.

He was coolly aware of the committal nature of the situation in which he now found himself, but he had accepted it with deliberation. His bank account guaranteed to the tune of five thousand pounds by his fortunate sister, the affairs of Alf Allison in his hands, he had negotiated successfully for a partnership with old Rowley Peacock, that somewhat indolent solicitor who, though tough as to terms and critical of Quin's failure to bring in his sister's business, was delighted to have the help of one who would do the bulk of the work with unrelenting application and efficiency.

The Sclanders Executry was among Quin's first cares of responsibility. (Old Rowley couldn't abide that grim, dark widow, Mrs. Robina Suttie or Sclanders, who relied much on legal advice and was invariably critical of it when it was tendered.) Quin had been at his quietly deferential, efficient best at his first meeting with widow and daughter, and Mrs. Sclanders thought well of the new young man, who in his turn thought well of the Sclanders estate and its holdings in property on good sites, three per cent Defence Bonds and sound Industrials. An invitation was given, after some prompting by Mhairi and careful thought by her mother, and accepted with well-controlled pleasure.

Saturday night at Lindisfarne was now an established part of the ritual of Quin's existence. It was at no time a delirious occasion and, in fact, invariably followed a decorous pattern of which Quin wholly approved. A little music by Mhairi, a rubber of three-handed whist—in which Mrs. Sclanders manifested her qualities of cunning and determination in a high degree—and then, whatever the state of the game, a period of silence while the hostess must hear the nine o'clock news on the wireless to the announcer's last exhausted word. Then she would rise on her plump little legs, not unlike those of the baby grand piano, and toddle to the door, saying: "Well, we must have a cup of tea at least."

The young people came to know that they would have exactly one half-hour alone together until, within a minute on either side of 9.45 p.m., Mrs. Sclanders returned, bearing a service of tea and sandwiches on a large silver salver. Mhairi invariably hurried to relieve her parent of this burden, and Quin invariably jumped to pull the occasional table into exactly the position favoured by his hostess. She in her turn invariably asked him if he would perhaps prefer a cup of cocoa, and invariably Quin said No: there was nothing nicer than a cup of fresh tea. General conversation followed, and at 10.15 p.m. Quin rose to bid Mrs. Sclanders good night and thank her for a pleasant evening, while Mhairi, accompanying him to the door, would tend to linger at the top of the steps and finally say brightly: "Well, we'll see you next Saturday."

The tides of passion ran their dark courses underneath and

behind these prim activities. The body of Quintin Nimmo lusted to despoil that of Mhairi Carmichael Sclanders, and he knew it would be with her very willing connivance. In his understanding of the business of living, however, other issues must be paramount. Ripeness could never be all for this careful, care-ridden man ; no song could break through the protective integument that, by the inscrutable processes of heredity and environment, had been created about his spirit. One must have security, all possible positions must be examined.

As he walked slowly home through the quiet, tree-lined streets of the West End on this Saturday evening of late June, 1946, while the thrushes sang passionately from trees in pleasant suburban gardens, Quin considered, as he might have considered a nice point of conveyancing, how and when he would most providentially make the proposal that would lead him to bed with the builder's sharp-nosed daughter. That would be in his own time, and he smiled short-sightedly as he went along, thinking that his arrangements were turning out very nicely indeed. After all, Mrs. Sclanders's expectation of life could not be much more than five years, ten at the most. Mhairi was an unusually late child.

Even as Quin was reaching these cool but agreeable conclusions, three of those closest to him in the existing arrangement of life were enduring such emotions as might, in two of these cases at least, overturn reason itself.

Under the trees outside the tennis courts, her racket nervously tapping the bare calf of her right leg, Kit stood with Harry Pettigrew, the School Captain. He had been her partner in three sets that long summer evening, and they had won them all. He had said that, as the defender of the base-line while he pranced aggressively at the net, there was no girl in the club like her. He had found a seat at her elbow at the belated service of tea, and then, shyly and with a strange tenderness in one so strong and handsome, he had asked if she was going home alone. Now, having progressed some fifty yards in ten minutes, they lingered under the trees, shy and enchanted in the stiff opening passages of calf-love. They were grave in the way of the innocent young.

"Of course you'll get a good bursary !" Harry protested.

"I just scraped through my Highers, but I bet you'll come out jolly near the top of the list. You wait and see."

"I'll probably cry my eyes out before I find my name somewhere near the bottom."

This was a most miserable lie. She knew with the born examinee's certainty that she had done extremely well. It was nevertheless the need of her femininity to be humble before this splendid young male.

"Not on your life! It'll be first on the list, I'll bet, or jolly near the top anyhow. And then I suppose you'll be away from Garvel and . . . I'll never see you again?"

"Nonsense!"

She really wanted to cry, like every benighted fool of a moonstruck woman from Naomi onwards, that she would forget the glittering prizes if it was his sovereign will to have her with him always. Harry, a straightforward young man, found it difficult to pursue this high romantic line.

"Are your people going anywhere on holiday this summer?" he asked.

"That's funny!" cried Kit. "My sister took a farmhouse down at Milton Bay this afternoon. For August."

"That's funny!" Harry repeated, his reserves of conversational coinage running down. "We're going to Blairbeth; that's just about four miles up the kyle, just round the corner from the Silver Island."

Both young faces glowed to this remarkable coincidence. Their eyes met.

"We must meet now and again," Harry suggested enthusiastically. "We could arrange picnics and things."

"Yes, and I'm sure Ness—that's my sister—would let us have the motor boat. You'd like my brother, Dug. He was in the Marine Commandos. He usually runs the boat, but he always lets me have a shot. . . . But oh, golly! Look at the time. I must scoot."

The young enchanted went slowly up the road together, gravely discussing the properties of motor vessels, their speeds, qualities of seaworthiness, colours, lines, engines, fuels and so on. His eyes seemed to be trying to hold her back when at length she turned into the close. She bounded up the several flights of stairs as if they were those of an escalator, hungry to get into

bed and, hugging herself under the quilt, go over and over again every syllable and nuance of her passage with Harry Pettigrew, and to envisage with adoring exactitude the lift of his fair, thick eyebrows above the moulding of the taut, freckled skin over his cheek-bones.

On the other side of the square, meanwhile, Mr. Pomphrey was engaged in conversation of a gratifying kind. His evening at the Club had already been more than usually pleasant. The cards had run sweetly for him at both Contract and Solo ; it seemed, as he phrased it to Duggie later on, he couldn't put a foot wrong whether at Snooker or straight Billiards ; never seen such a passage of good fortune in all his life. Over a noggin in the smokeroom before the bar closed, dashed if he hadn't had the pleasure of meeting Sir Utrick MacPhie, the impressively kilted if impoverished laird of all the barren lands about and above the fertile enclave of Milton Bay, brought in for a quick one after the Rover Scouts' Rally by Johnnie Archibald, the coal fellow. Hearing from Olly that he was to be at Ardmillan for August, Sir Utrick had been dashed civil and even friendly, declaring that Mr. Pomphrey must certainly come up to Lettergair Lodge and have a day on the river. In fact, Sir Utrick would instruct his factor chappie to send Mr. Pomphrey a permit for the month.

If that were not enough of fullness of living, just as Olly was passing the Club proper, who should come out on the steps but Stevie Blythe of the Hosiery Mills. He crossed the street to go up the hill with Mr. Pomphrey, saying :

"Hallo, Pomphrey ! Haven't seen you for a long time. Still sticking to the National ? "

"Yes, it suits me very nicely in many ways," Olly countered warily.

"I'm told all sorts of queer fish are getting in nowadays. Small shopkeepers and even Yids. You can't like that."

"Finance Committee feeling the draught, I suppose. Some chaps in the Club would have been barred in my father's time, if it comes to that."

"Well, I suppose there must be changes all round. Just the same, I'm surprised you don't come in with us. If you'd like it, Pomphrey, I'll be delighted to put you up. I know

Dick Stewart and Harry Sculthorp'll be ready to second you."

There it was : just like that : right off the bat.

Olly turned into the close of No. 20 Stornoway Street in a state of much gratification. He did not pause to examine the causes of this quite surprising change of policy on the part of a big man in the Club—the cold fact that the new taxation was at once reducing membership and drawings ; the sad fact that his association with a large sum of money had helped to alter the views of those hard men who had for years seen him as a failure, reduced to living in lodgings in a tenement building, no class at all. Olly's only positive thinking at this pleasing stage of his life, and this mild enough, was that it wouldn't be a half-bad idea if Miss Nimmo were now to decide to buy a house with a good address in the West End.

Ness heard and recognised the various noises her people made on their way upstairs : Quin's nimble trot on the steps with a rather deliberate passage across the landings ; Kit's bounding rush on rubber-soled shoes ; Olly's markedly ageing and sedate ascent, with the grunt on each stage of his cigarette cough.

"Well, I think that's all my people home," she was saying with more of a tremor than she liked to hear in her own voice. "Now they'll all be shouting for supper."

Andrew Buchan was seeing her out through the dim lobby of his flat. His huge physical presence had always this power to unnerve her.

"It was good of you to let me have a night out, Miss Nimmo. I'm more grateful than I can tell you."

"But it's a pleasure to sit with Mrs. Buchan ! I thought she was a good deal calmer to-night."

They were out on the pipeclayed landing. Andrew Buchan had closed the front door of his flat behind him.

"It comes and it goes," he said. His voice sounded unusually deep with emotion. "But what I could have done without your help and Kit's . . ."

On an impulse, of which the origins were not to be guessed, his big right hand grasped her arm above the elbow and squeezed the flesh ; and Ness was afraid. It might be his awkward expression of gratitude, she realised, but there, in the dim-lit vacuity of the close with the draughts and the smells

rising from below, she was foolishly afraid with the fear that had dogged her for so many years now.

"That's nothing," said Ness brusquely. "Good night, Mr. Buchan!"

As she hurried upstairs she had the feeling of having pulled herself out of the grasp of a male she liked and admired and feared, all at once.

She became at once the busy housewife about the kitchen, making tea, laying out precious biscuits, oatcakes and cheese, steeping the oatmeal for porridge, and putting out the milk bottles. Duggie was in the mood to be dangerously funny about what he had guessed to be Quin's adventure in love, and a long story obviously lay behind the portals of the moustache that Olly flicked upwards from time to time. Ness was brusque for her.

"Sorry, everybody, but I'm going straight to bed. I really think I must have got a chill to-day in the boat."

Olly was immediately solicitous, with another series of pharmaceutical suggestions. Duggie encouraged her to go immediately and get her head down to it. Quin thought that the chill theory was probably quite sound; he had himself noticed a distinct lowering of the system, walking home; you've got to look after yourself, he added anxiously and not unkindly.

"Get to bed, Ness, and I'll clear up," said Kit briefly.

Ness knew that Kit knew, the girl's eyes watchful, that a chill on the liver was the least of it. She could almost feel the child's sharp mind searching for the scrubby secret that had come up the close on a badly-typewritten sheet of paper to darken the sunset of a lovely day.

3

The letters kept coming, but with the irregularity of the mind that conceived them. There might be two in a day, then a long break, then one each morning for three days running, then such an intermission as caused a worried woman almost to believe that the wave of beastliness had at length passed over and beyond her.

Ness read the first half-dozen of them and so reached, at

least, the necessary calmness of thought to perceive that the mind of the enemy ran in a lustful rut, out of which it stirred only now and again to stab shrewdly enough at one or other of Ness's proud privacies. She could in certain moods see the affair as a sort of problem of detection : a matter for the police, for the lawyers at least. She sacrificially and secretly burned the first half-dozen of the sad missives, and then she started to hoard them and lock them away, unopened. The lawyers might want them some day.

Still, she could not act to free herself. The power of anonymity had her paralysed ; the sense of guilt in the Protestant conscience forced her to put off and put off. She was afraid to face what horrible embarrassment on the personal level the inquiries of the lawyers or the police might uncover. She suffered like one who knows that cancer is eating into a vital part of the body and is still unable to confide in the dearest of all, even in the doctor : the prisoner of the lonely and vulnerable pride of the individual.

What a blessing it was in late July to be packing for the holiday at Ardmillan ! Ness could almost sing as she had the trunks and suitcases laid out on the worn carpet of the old sewing-room, all the myriad bits and pieces of family clothing piled on tables and the tops of chests of drawers. It was the funny thing about keeping house for other people that, while you sometimes thought it a form of slavery, it was satisfying to have the monarchy of a household's wardrobe, a territory of which you alone knew every nook and cranny. As she worked thus, there was at the back of Ness's mind, making her happy, the notion that she was about to escape from the letters.

She paused in her labours to light a cigarette, and she wandered to look out of the attic window across the Firth. It was an unfriendly evening with clouds lingering after a showery day and a northerly wind whipping the seas into such a grey-green flurry that you fancied you must die out of hand if you were to tumble among them. The grey and surly cat's-paws blotched the anchorage across four miles of water, and not even a small yacht was stirring among the half-dozen freighters at anchor in the Deeps. Even so, Ness saw that a shaft of late sun had so caught the tops of a planting of firs above the little town on the other side of the water that it lighted a patch

of distant hillside as with a blaze of yellow fire ; and then, by the play of the clouds, the beam of light fell on the white-washed walls of a small house on the hill over there.

Nature's pretty trick set her yearning rather unhappily again. Long enough she had been evading even the approach to the decision, but she knew in the depths of her mind that she must find a way of escape from the tenement in Stornoway Street or be for ever unhappy. For all the warmth of her own family life, enriched now by the conveniences that money could buy, the place was a prison for her spirit, peopled by too many sordid ghosts, too ugly for her fastidiousness to bear : the glorious view from the attic room a mockery.

Buy a house in the West End, urged Quin sensibly, but Ness had never found it easy to conduct the larger business of living on common-sensical lines. There were so many complications, so many conflicting subtleties, and such a confused future to be considered. The head of a family, as she now so strangely realised herself to be, could only on an impulse plot a course of action ; and it was in the nature of this middle-ageing woman to distrust impulses.

Ness stubbed her cigarette on the window-sill and turned back to her work, piously believing that in the peace of Ardmillan she would be able to resolve the tangle in her mind. Work was a wonderful anodyne ; it was a glory when you knew yourself to be packing for Kit's holiday. . . .

She ran her hand tenderly along the fabric of one of the girl's undergarments. The little gesture was an act of adoring and admiring love. There appeared on the screen of her mind the photographed picture of the announcement in the *Glasgow Herald*, in diminutive type :

1. Nimmo, Katherine G., Garvel Grammar School.
(E.F.L.M.Sc. Geog.)

First place in the bursary awards for young Kit, demonstrably the cleverest girl in all that large area of Scotland. It was a blessing to be her sister and her guardian. Kit was good, too ; kind and sound. It was wonderful that Quin, who approved of success, had come home that evening from a professional visit to Glasgow with a fine wristlet watch for his

clever little sister : Quin's first recorded expression of overt emotion.

Ness's sentimental tears streamed down her cheeks to drop on the feminine garments now being neatly packed in Wee Captain Slocum's old sea chest ; and then she was chuckling to recall how embarrassed and silly Quin looked when Kit, uplifted by the glory of his gift, made one of her impulsive leaps at him and, her young arms tight round his neck, kissed him all over the face.

She heard his footsteps on the attic stairs. What was he after now ? He had been gentler in his manners these last few weeks, more tolerant, more often silent before a challenge that would once have provoked an immediate and acid comment. She saw at once that he was uneasy now.

"Hullo, Ness ! Packing ?"

"Yes. A heartbreaking job, but I like it, old fool that I am."

"It's got to be done, I suppose," Quin observed conventionally.

He moved to the window, looked out across the Firth for a while, then turned back to stand over her as she knelt by the trunk. Ness felt the portentousness he was bringing to his announcement.

"I say, Ness . . ."

"Yes, Quin. What is it ?"

"I say, I wonder if you would mind asking a friend of mine down to Ardmillan for a day, a lady friend ?"

Ness wanted to laugh ; and thank goodness young Kit was out, or they'd both be in the giggles.

"Certainly, Quin," she said easily. "Who is she ?"

"Miss Sclanders, Mhairi Sclanders. You remember her father, the builder ; died during the war. She and her mother live in Lindisfarne, in Charlotte Street.

"Of course I know the girl. Her mother and I have a sort of nodding acquaintance in queues. That's delightful, Quin ! Would you like me to write and ask her for a week-end ?"

"Oh, no ! Just a day, some Saturday perhaps," he said quickly.

And there was the real Quin. He was only approaching a reconnoitred position with true caution. A week-end would

be too definitely committal altogether. And Ness wondered wryly, if Miss Sclanders had to be exhibited to the family and the family to Miss Sclanders, why not bring her along to No. 20 Stornoway Street? To that she knew the sour answer.

"Well, we'll be delighted, Quin. Just make the arrangement when it suits you and let me know a day or two in advance."

"That's very good of you, Ness. And I say, please don't tell Duggie and Kit. They'll just make a silly joke of it."

"I don't think they will," retorted Ness rather coldly. "Duggie is lost in this scheme of his, and I think you might trust Kit to be kind about a young woman who may be her sister-in-law."

"Good lord!" cried Quin in alarm. "That's going just a bit too fast. Surely I can introduce a friend without everybody making a romantic story out of it?"

What a blind person was Quin! thought Ness when he left her alone again. And how many small lies and deceptions could circulate within a small family circle! Of course, Kit and Duggie had long ago correctly guessed at the causes of Quin's dressings-up and new reticences. When these two got together, the speculations on Quin's wedding ceremonies, domestic arrangements and connubial relations were hardly fit for decent ears to hear. But why could Quin not perceive that their reticence in his presence was the offer of a courtesy?

Rising, her knees aching, and turning again to the window, Ness began to apprehend that the talk with her brother about an apparently small matter did in fact loom quite ominously in the pattern of her own problems. Quin was going to marry, no doubt about that; and Quin out of the house would ease her choice of decision. But with Quin away, Kit at the University, and Duggie running his own business elsewhere, she and poor Olly would be left in an intimacy her tenderness in these matters could hardly allow her to contemplate.

Oh dear! Oh dear! It was all very difficult and confusing, and she was no nearer making up her mind than ever she had been. Turning from her packing to go downstairs and make the supper, Ness tried again to believe that the solution would miraculously come to her in the peace of the summer holiday.

In that peace she was lapped within the week. She lounged in a deck-chair on the lawn above the kyle, deliberately enjoying once more such leisure as she had not known in three decades before, the ease that money alone could buy. It was still the miraculous thing that the fortune from Pebbleworth's Pools could gather beauty about her, as now in the handsome curves of the hills above the strait, the purple of heather on them, the crinkled freshness of oak and hazel and birch round the curve of Milton Bay below.

The power of money ! It was fantastic, and she would never get used to it. Even in such a little thing as getting the family and its luggage from Garvel to Ardmillan. Most people would have the tiresome fuss of labelling things and getting all sorts of bits and pieces down to the pier ; then the long and anxious journey, watching that your goods were not put off at the wrong place, counting them anxiously as they went ashore and hiring to get them taken up the hill ; losing tickets and taking turns for lunch in an overcrowded saloon, somebody always watching the luggage.

The fortunate Nimmos, on the other hand, simply hired one huge Daimler, like a drawing-room on wheels, to take Ness and Kit and the odd bits of baggage down to the jetty at Carpock Bay, where Duggie was waiting with the dinghy and Olly stood in the cockpit of the *Dulcibelle*, ready with a courtly hand to help the ladies over the side. Then you had a lovely sail down the Firth and up the kyle at a pace of your own choosing, with a nice cold lunch on the way, your dear ones about you and no intruders. And at the other end nice Mr. Mackenzie, grinning but silent, was down with tractor and trailer to take everything up to the farm and report that the heavy stuff had come safely in advance.

It was comic to be a lady of means : she, Ness Nimmo, late sempstress-landlady, daughter of poor Wee Captain Slocum ; and she could never escape the feeling that she existed in a state of sin, especially when she thought of millions queueing in cities and towns for packed buses, sweating and burdened with fibre suitcases and shopping-bags in imitation

leather that were stuffed with dirty handkerchiefs, sticky sweets for the older children and nappies for the babies, which must make each journey a pathetic purgatory of noise and smell. She could not, however, either resist nor seriously deplore the charm of her present circumstance. Unaccustomed to political thought, Ness knew only that freedom of action and privacy in reasonable comfort were the dearest needs of the human spirit.

Drowsing, and hearing the drumming of the bees in the sycamores overhead, she wondered lazily where Kit had gone to ; and Kit, looking over the wall of the kitchen garden, thought how handsome Ness looked stretched out in her light, short frock of dappled cotton. But she took it that Ness was asleep in the afternoon sun ; and Ness went on to think sleepily what a good time they were all having at Ardmillan and how lucky she had been, fortified by the power of money, to have got this blessed place to themselves for a month.

Mr. Pomphrey was in the meantime sound asleep in his room upstairs, holding strongly that to slumber out of doors was to be humbugged by a lot of dashed flies and things and to have a good thing spoiled in divers other ways. He had tried it once at Ardmillan and had been most rudely wakened by a damned great horse breathing into his ear ; the brute might have started licking his face if he hadn't streaked it for the house.

His afternoon nap was of importance to Olly, part and parcel of the agreeable ritual he had promptly worked out for his stay at the coast. Toddle along to the MacPhie Arms at eleven for a noggin and a yarn with the landlord ; hang about the post office for the newspapers and the letters ; the *Glasgow Herald* before lunch and after it the ritual spot of shut-eye. After tea the MacPhie Arms claimed him again for a couple of snifters, perhaps more if some of the yachting chappies were in the bay and Olly could safely introduce himself on the strength of the *Dulcibelle* and the blue burgee of the Royal Firth fluttering at the masthead. Supper, and then a go at the sea-fishing with young Kit or Duggie, if he was back in time. And a jolly nice way of spending a holiday, Olly thoroughly agreed with himself.

Ness opened her eyes to the touch of a kiss on her forehead.

She looked to see Duggie's dark, smiling face above her in reverse.

"You looked rather nice, old Ness, so I thought I'd waken you gently."

"You're a rascal!" she cried, blushing and happy. "But why are you back so early?"

He was away every day now, happily pushing round the popular resorts of the outer Firth the affairs of what was now solemnly known as the Coast Cruising Company with its house-flag of three CCCs in white on azure.

"I'm taking a long week-end. The lads can look after the fleet. There they go with a cargo of suckers at five bob a skull."

He pointed to a sizable white boat that, beamy and low in the water, carried a complement of at least thirty passengers up the kyle towards the islands.

"That's only one picnic party from the big hotel. We've got two others away down the Firth. Lord, I could fill ten boats a day in this weather! *And*, my girl, I've landed a winter contract—Post Office job; mails to outlying places with names that would choke you. I tell you, it's a pushover. Wait till you get your whack of the profits."

"But, Duggie dear . . . Oh, hullo, Mr. Pomphrey!"

Olly, greatly refreshed by sleep, had come out to join them, the fragrance of his Norfolk shag pleasantly scenting the air, and the tale of Duggie's success had to be told all over again.

"Jolly good, Duggie! Knew you'd make a good show. It's what I said," he caught his hostess's eye with a wise smile. "Money makes money. No getting away from it, whatever the Socialist chappies think."

Then Kit, in grey shorts, was belling from the porch:

"Tea's ready. Can't you smell the scones?"

"What! New-baked scones and fresh farm butter!" cried Olly. "Oh, I say!"

There was a bewilderment of fragrances in the sitting-room—of the slight browning of girdle scones, of sweet-william and sweet-peas and rambler roses in vases, of strong tea freshly infused.

"And what were you doing with yourself this afternoon,

Kit?" Ness asked conventionally as she poured for everybody.

"Oh, Aggie the At and I," the girl said blithely, using the family nickname for the shepherd's daughter who worked like a nigger about the house; they were firm friends; "Aggie the At and I went up the hill to watch the men shearing. We agreed that God was merciful in not making us ewes. So undignified! Then we toddled down again and made the scones."

"And jolly well done, too, Kit!" cried Olly handsomely. "Melt in the mouth."

"Aggie's a wonderful girl," observed Ness with gravity.

"Aggie's a dear!" Kit had to add generously. "By gosh! The man that gets Aggie for a wife can thank his lucky stars. Which reminds me . . ."

Kit's exuberance was checked by a look from Ness, and she quickly turned to Duggie.

"Are we fishing to-night, Dug?"

"That was the idea. In fact," he glanced at Olly, "I thought we might have a cut at dear old Utterick Mac-Fitterick's sea trout in the mouth of the Lonaig, and I bought some minnows in Rathmore this afternoon. What about it, Mr. Pomphrey?"

"Don't mind if I do," said Olly gravely, unfortunately reminding Kit of a comic character on the wireless. "Fact is, I've always thought that if you play the game and stick to the rules, a spot of poaching is rather fun."

Ness watched the rise of excitement in her young sister. The girl had always an ecstatic response to novelty and risk in experience, especially when Duggie was her leader. Ness spoke quietly.

"Another cup of tea, Kit?"

"You bet! Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow . . . Golly! To-morrow we meet Miss Mhairi Sclanders."

Ness frowned. Mr. Pomphrey coughed primly.

"I'm sure," he said, "we'll all be delighted to meet the young lady."

"I'm sure we will," agreed Ness, ignoring Duggie's wicked grin. "She looks a nice girl. And now," she added hastily, rising. "Please don't get up, Mr. Pomphrey. If you're all

going fishing, I'd better go and see Aggie about the supper. Half-past six sharp ; will that do ? ”

She did not immediately go through to the kitchen. Instead she walked out on the elevated platform of the lawn and, from a favourite corner under the sycamores, looked up the waterway towards the barrier of hills that, now dark against the westering sun, caused the kyle to swing at a sharp angle southwards beyond the low islands. She felt angry with Kit and was sorry to be angry with her favourite. But it would be too bad if the child started getting uppish notions. She would get a piece of Ness's mind before the night was over.

“ Ahoy there, Ness ! ” a deep voice startled her. “ We'll be back in good time for supper. ”

Duggie and Olly were away down the winding farm road to the MacPhie Arms. That sort of thing pleased her. She liked the tiny convolutions of the quiet life—Olly dawdling down to the inn and coming back with the papers in the forenoon ; Kit and Aggie the At climbing the hill to watch the shearing, the two men and the girl going out to poach the loosely protected estuarine waters ; the casual baking of girdle scones and the scent of sweet-william.

Her own annoyance with Kit was just because the girl had expressed her own fear of an intrusion with apparently incalculable possibilities. It was as if this Sclanders girl might somehow bring into the peace of Ardmillan all that confusion of shabbiness and bother and conflict which had been so far left behind that, within the first fortnight of this blessed August, the anonymous letter-writer had been silent, perhaps baffled.

Ness turned towards the porch. She must be quite sure that Aggie the At could handle a roasting pullet, fresh peas and new potatoes.

5

The *Dulcibelle* set off in style next morning to pick up Quin and his lady off the steamer at Rathmore, Duggie and Kit in charge. As they waited on the quayside for the turbine vessel to come suavely round the curve of the bay to her berth they looked, though they knew it not, rather like piratical strangers

from remote parts amid the industrial throng on holiday : Kit in her grey shorts and yellow cellular blouse, Duggie in a sleeveless blue shirt, stained grey slacks stuffed into gum-boots, and the maroon beret scrugged down over his black left eyebrow.

It was only when Miss Sclanders stepped ashore that Kit became conscious of near-nudity. The lady had come dressed in her best—quite naturally, Kit conceded—but need the nylons be so flawless, the heels so high, the hat so elaborate above a costume that would have graced a wedding? Quin might have had the sense to tell the woman that they travelled rough from Ardmillan, but there he was, his hand under Mhairi's elbow, simpering like a Cheshire cat in proud possession of a sardine.

"I'm afraid we look like tinkers, Miss Sclanders," she greeted the guest cheerfully, "but Duggie and I run the boat, and we're apt to get mucked up with oil and stuff. You'll find it quite comfortable in the cockpit. And, oh! I don't think you've met Duggie."

"How do, Miss Sclanders," grunted Duggie, grinning and trying to pump enthusiasm into a handshake that was met only by a collapse of frail and nerveless fingers within his grip.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Nimmo," said Mhairi.

"Aw, just call me Duggie and make a day of it!" he laughed largely.

"Duggie's our rough diamond, Mhairi," Quin explained with thin, prim anxiety.

"The boat's at the slip behind the pier," said Kit hastily. "I expect Ness will want us back soon for a cup of tea. Ness," she explained to Miss Sclanders, leading the way along the crowded pier, "never thinks anything's right until you have a cup of tea."

"Is that so?" remarked Mhairi in the flat tone of her convention. "My mother's exactly like that too. It's funny, isn't it?"

It was not funny, thought Kit unreasonably. It was the reverse of funny. It was what Duggie would call just plain, bloody dull. Oh, but this woman was flat, devoid of interest, a breeder at the best, and late in starting at that!

"Oh, is that the boat?" she cried at the sight of the

Dulcibelle. "Goodness, I hope I'm not going to be sick!"

"I don't think so," said Kit, trying to keep the edge of contempt out of her voice. "There's only a ripple on the water. You'll like the sail, I'm sure."

It was doubtful if Mhairi notably liked the sail. Duggie had been at pains to lush up the cockpit with cushions and muck, as he put it, but the guest seemed continually worried about her hat, the set of her hair, the fixture of cheeks and lips she frequently studied in a mirror out of her copious handbag. You pointed out landmarks, and Mhairi said "Is that so?" or "Fancy that!"

Ness was down on the concrete jetty at Milton Bay with Olly to greet the new arrivals: Olly in his tight and yellowing flannels and an antique sweater woven in chain pattern. Kit rowed the dinghy out to the *Dulcibelle* and rejoined Duggie with relief.

"What a female!" she expressed her feelings violently. "Thirty yards to the shore and she's sure the dinghy's going to sink, clutching at dear Quin for safety. Lord, what a miserable day it's going to be!"

"Why take it so seriously?" Duggie asked curtly. "It's only a day, and it's Quin's funeral after all. Now, go and put the junk in the cockpit back in the cabin and lock up. Then we'll go ashore and join the merry throng."

Yes, there it was; why should she take it so seriously? Just peevish annoyance at having one day spoiled by a dull woman? Sheer selfish resentment of a break through the tight ring of the family? Kit was never to resolve the problem of her excessive antipathy, but all that day there never left her this irrational feeling that the coming of Mhairi into the picture was of unhappy portent. Please God Quin would take her for a walk in the afternoon if the creature could totter four hundred yards in those fancy shoes of hers.

Even so, with her searching and detached feeling for the values and interplays of personality, Kit almost enjoyed watching how, before the sheer flatness of Mhairi, even the tolerance and kindness of Ness and the benevolent courtesy of Olly visibly flagged as the day wore on. Mhairi became a specimen, fascinating in the limited range of her reactions. Absorbed and even enchanted, the clever child tried to per-

ceive how any process of ratiocination could pass through the shallows of that mind which expressed itself regularly in a given series of phrases. Kit felt at moments that if she heard the guest again describe something as "simply lovely"—it might be anything from a book she had read to the salad at lunch, by way of the most theatrical views in the West Highlands—she must scream loudly and then lie on the floor, kicking her legs in the air. In the smugness of her mental superiority, Kit started to make out in her mind a list of synonyms which, presented to Mhairi with a set of rules and definitions, would wonderfully enrich her vocabulary and enhance her interest for other people.

For "simply lovely" of the view up the kyle, say "beautiful," of the salad "delightful," of the book "interesting" or "enchancing" or "provocative." Oh, anything but "simply lovely" for everything! It was all daft, but the wonder was that Quin, no fool by a long chalk, could sit there and simper while his chosen woman made an ass of herself every time she opened her carefully incarnadined lips. And then you were fascinated by the fact that Mhairi in powdered profile was exactly like Quin in profile—two sharp noses sticking out from receding bases—and you wondered, with a strangely fascinated distaste, what sort of progeny might result from the physical union.

Kit was unhappy all afternoon, knowing herself to be guilty of mental cruelty towards a harmless enough creature. She was aware of the lowering of Ness's eyebrows at some of her remarks to Mhairi; she remembered, a thought sullenly, the firm scolding of the night before. (Ness could fairly lay it into you when she felt that decency had been outraged!) But this girl had her own destiny in merely having to believe that stupidity, like ugliness in dressing, could be wilful in its implicit refusal to take pains—as if accuracy, let alone propriety, were of no account! She found relief in the company of Aggie the At, whose realism was compact and understandable, and rang the bell for tea with enthusiasm, knowing that in half an hour's time she and Duggie would be taking the *Dulcibelle* down to Rathmore and Mhairi out of sight and hearing for a long time to come.

They all went down the hill to see Mhairi off: all, that is,

except Olly, who halted at the iron gate of the uplifted lawn, bowed over the guest's gloved hand, protested his pleasure in having met her and begged to be excused going further, mumbling something about letters and newspapers awaiting his urgent attention. Mhairi told Quin on the steamer going home that Mr. Pomphrey was her idea of the perfect gentleman ; his manners were simply lovely.

Olly returned to the house, moving crisply over the gravel. It was not without purpose that he had excused himself from going downhill with the house party. Partly it was his sense of the approaching hour when, according to his narrow but natural habit, one toddled down to the MacPhie Arms and relaxed. In a greater measure, however, it was his suspicion that the day's post, forgotten in the excitement of Mhairi's visit and collected by Aggie the At in the early afternoon, wanted—as he phrased it to himself—a bit of looking at.

He lifted the small pile of letters from the hallstand and scanned the addresses closely. Only one was directed to himself, and he thrust it at once into the left-hand pocket of his reefer jacket. Then he went through the considerable pile addressed to Miss Nimmo and, doing so, had the air of a worried and puzzled detective. Over one envelope of this batch he lingered, nervously brushing his moustache. He took his own letter out of his pocket and compared the type-written legends, the qualities of the papers and the shapes of the containers. He then replaced Ness's bundle of correspondence on the platform of the hallstand and went out of doors again to pace the lawn.

Peter Oliphant Pomphrey had long survived the rubs of serious life by the simple technique of evading them, but now he knew himself to be caught up, ineluctably, in the net of circumstance. It was damned awful, but there it was ; in fact, it was here and now, breaking through the crust of his defences.

He paused behind the wire fence and watched the *Dulcibelle*, with a pretty flurry of foam under her counter, set off down the kyle towards Rathmore. He saw Ness, on the jetty, linger to wave after the ship departing and then turn slowly towards the shore road. He had the idea that she was at once tired and relieved, well content to be alone again, taking her time up the winding road to the farm.

Olly saw her as a figure in a play : the innocent enjoying the peace of the Highland hillside, not knowing what of unpleasantness was about to pounce on her. A damned fine woman, Olly had always thought, in person and mind and spirit ; and now it was just too damned bad that they must wade through a lot of unpleasantness together.

"Hullo, Mr. Pomphrey !" she greeted him, panting after the climb up the farm road. "I thought you'd be away down to the hotel."

"No. In fact I waited to see you. I'm afraid we'll have to have a talk about a very unpleasant subject, Miss Nimmo."

He was sorry to see the startle of fear on her face.

"Mr. Pomphrey ! What on earth . . . ?"

"I think we might go indoors."

Ness felt like a wicked schoolgirl being marched to punishment. She sat down on the couch in the living-room, trembling and vaguely angry. She was all the more alarmed when Olly turned from her and, walking to the window, seemed to be addressing his remarks to the lawn outside.

"You have been receiving anonymous letters, I think," he began, his nervousness making him sound abrupt, like a cross-examining counsel.

"Why should you know ?" she retorted.

"Because I have been getting them myself."

"You, too ! Oh, Mr. Pomphrey . . ."

"Quite a lot. Filthy rubbish, not worth wasting a thought on. Obviously somebody completely cracked. I burned the confounded garbage, using the tongs to lift the beastly things with. Then I was looking through the letters when you went down the road with Miss What's-her-name, and here's another of the rotten things for me, and I couldn't help seeing there was one for you—same typing, same envelope. Just put two and two together ; and I did think, Miss Nimmo, most rottenly awkward as it is, I did think we should face it and get this nonsense stopped."

"Stopped ! But how ?" She began to cry, sniffing. "So horrible ! So pitiful !"

Olly turned to face her.

"I'm most confoundedly sorry for you, Miss Nimmo. Doesn't matter much to me, but most distressing for you, I

know," and his kindness made Ness's tears flow all the more copiously. "But you know as well as I do where they come from?"

"I would almost rather not know," she mourned.

"Obvious, I'm afraid. Strictly between you and me, they simply crossed the landing."

Olly was rather proud of this crisply rhetorical statement of the result of a deductive process. He waited for his companion's response. It came tardily and sombrely.

"No, I don't think we can blame the McJannets," she said.

"You mean to say! . . . I should have thought it pretty obvious. We hear their beastly old typewriter clacking continually, and it's almost as sure as guns are iron that stinking rot like that always comes from—well, old women like them."

"No, Mr. Pomphrey. It was the first thing I thought of, naturally. But I looked up the typewritten receipts for the rents, and they don't match with these horrible screeds at all. It's quite a different machine."

"Well, I'll be blowed!" said Olly. "Now we've got a simply beastly problem on our hands."

He started to pace the room, rolling a cigarette as he went, and Ness saw in him, with affection, a not very clever man struggling to recover his grip on a situation he had confidently thought under control.

"Anyhow," he resumed at length, the man of affairs again, "it's jolly well got to stop. I don't know how the police chappies go about it or what they call it, but I rather think this poison pen business is actually a crime—maybe breach of the peace, for all I know; they certainly take a jolly fierce view of it. But what I suggest, Miss Nimmo, is first thing after we're back in Garvel, you go to your lawyer people and tell them all about it. They'll know the ropes. In fact, I'll be delighted to go with you. Seems to me we've got to put all the cards on the table with a bang."

He paused in his striding to light his cigarette with the Ronson that Ness, coming into her fortune, had given him on his birthday.

"Yes," she agreed slowly. "I wish it would stop. We must really do something about it."

"And not too soon," said Olly, pleased with a diplomatic victory. "Dug and Kit should be back any minute now."

Returning from the last lift to Rathmore and back in the *Dulcibelle*, Kit perceived in a flash that Ness was troubled and was thus, in her own pathetic immaturity, convinced that the advent of Miss Mhairi Sclanders had been as mysteriously upsetting as she herself had felt it must be.

6

The evenings of late August grew chilly, and the lighting of lamps in the living-room at Ardmillan gloomily intimated winter's approach. There were nights so cold, the clouds heavy above the hills and the scurries of wind down the kyle so sharp, that Ness was moved to put a match to the fire in defiance of all her housewifely instincts.

"Oh, isn't it brutal that we've got to leave Ardmillan next week!" Kit wailed frequently. "This has been the happiest month of all my young life."

"All good things must come to an end," Ness would sententiously reply. "And I'll need all the time to get you fitted out for the University and get you fixed up in a hostel."

She could never confess that the autumnal feeling lay more heavily on her own spirit than on that of any of the others, even Kit. She was afraid. Sometimes she felt it beyond her spiritual power to return to No. 20 Stornoway Street and the close. Sometimes she wildly dreamed of setting up in a hotel and then recoiled, realising how she would thus place sentence of banishment on Olly, her dependent. She could only comfort herself by pretending that her mind was made up to buy a house and make a final break, but at the back of that mind there lurked the suspicion that it could never be made up with certainty.

One afternoon she had to bring herself to prepare for the packing. She went upstairs to the task all the more unwillingly since, after the cold snap and the dark evenings, warmth and colour had come back to the countryside through tinted mists and a smirr of gentle rain. Kit and Aggie the At were away to Rathmore, all excited in their best clothes and eager for

battle with a long shopping list. Olly had subtly contrived to recall his existence to Sir Utrick MacPhie and, mighty pleased with himself, had been carried off by the baronet himself in a tiny Ford Eight of great age and almost charming decrepitude.

Ness started in Kit's room, the little one above the porch, with the tendrils of clematis softly tapping at the small panes of the wide-open window. The way these young girls left smears of powder on their dressing-tables ; Ness wondered how they could stand it. A pair of slippers kicked into the fireplace, anyhow. A brassiere with a broken strap over the end of the bed ; always bursting out of her clothes, that child, and then just throwing them aside in her excitement of merely living.

The opening of the wardrobe door revealed a state of affairs that caused a fret of annoyance to pass across Ness's mind. Cotton frocks and bits of underwear hung anyhow ; stuff that should have been at the wash long ago. On the floor of the wardrobe was a heap of stockings and ankle-socks and, reaching to lift and throw on the floor this offensive mass of material, Ness felt the bulk of a book at the base of it and drew out a volume entitled *Forever Amber*. One of poor Kit's silly little secrets. Ness was not alarmed, remembering the dark, hot curiosities of her own adolescence. It was merely what she, Ness Nimmo, would call a nasty book, and the title was somehow familiar. Was it Duggie who had mentioned it in one of his wilder tales of military life ?

Again pondering the nature of her sister, the girl with all the brains and her full share of the ordinary passions, the girl whose future was her own deepest concern, Ness tossed the book on to the bed and turned to look out the window.

Not even a rowing boat stirred on the kyle. The small hills on the island across the water were peopled only by young cattle-beasts, browsing, the bright tans and whites of the Ayrshire breed magnificently lighted by the incandescence from a clear sun against green pasture. Her gaze shortening, however, to the derelict pier and then to the road round Milton Bay immediately below, she was startled to see the tall and burly figure of a middle-aged man slowly make its way up the winding farm track, coming undoubtedly to pay a visit to Ardmillan.

It was Andrew Buchan, and why Andrew Buchan should come to see her in the middle of a summer afternoon she was afraid to think. It might be nothing, a tiny accident of circumstance: a polite call in a casual passing; but she could not delude herself. His walk uphill was heavy, as if he wearily approached a difficult encounter, and she felt herself about to face a crisis long expected.

She hurried through to her own room to see in the mirror that she was presentable and reasonably calm in her countenance. She pressed a fresh handkerchief over the tilted mouth of a bottle of eau-de-Cologne and then, tugging at her frock to get it set aright, hurried downstairs and out of the porch across the lawn to greet the visitor.

"Mr. Buchan! How nice to see you! And what a surprise!"

"Yes, I'm afraid it's a surprise, Miss Nimmo."

His tone was that of a man in faintly self-conscious mourning, but Ness saw him kindly as a stricken plain man of the Scottish sort without any social gift of dissimulation. He had not climbed up to Ardmillan on any gay and casual errand.

"But come in, Mr. Buchan, and we'll have a cup of tea," Ness suggested with brittle, false cheerfulness. "I'm terribly sorry, but every one of my family is away for the day. Will you excuse me till I put the kettle on?"

"Please don't trouble about that, Miss Nimmo. I've arranged for tea in the hotel with the children."

"Are the children here? Why didn't you bring them up to the farm? I'd have loved to give them tea and let them play about."

"No, no! They're happy enough on the shore down there with their auntie; that's my married sister. To tell you the truth, Miss Nimmo, I'm glad to see you alone just for a minute or two, and then I'll go. I just wanted to let you know, quietly, that poor Janet has been taken away."

He spoke flatly and solidly as he might have done of a shipbuilding job, but Ness recognised in a flash the extreme degree of personal pain and shame covered by the heavy phrases and the flat vowels of the man's regional speech.

"Oh, Mr. Buchan! Poor Janet! Oh, I'm sorry, sorry!"

"It came on Tuesday, a week past," the big man recited, as if it were a piece rehearsed. "Thank goodness I was at home! Just after supper. There had been turns, of course, but this was vicious. It was an awful job, handling the children and getting the doctor and all that. I missed you and your folk that night, I can tell you. However, we got her away in the long run. She's in that place near Dumfries."

Andrew Buchan told his story with his head bent over the clutch of his great shipbuilder's hands. Then he raised his eyes, but not his head, as if to ask her if this was not more than a man should be asked to bear. Ness struggled to express herself coherently.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Buchan, I'm terribly sorry! We knew she was ill, but this, and the young children! Is there anything at all we can do to help?"

"I don't know what to think. My sister's there, of course, but she has her own house to look after. I can't expect her to wait with me for ever."

"I wonder if we could find you a housekeeper?" suggested Ness.

Andrew Buchan raised his heavy head at length and smiled wearily.

"And where on earth," he asked, "would I find a spare room for a housekeeper in our pokey wee flat?"

"Yes, there's that."

Ness felt she shared the cage in which Andrew Buchan had been so disastrously enclosed. She also perceived that the ground they trod was of that sort of delicacy she could never confidently face.

"It's very difficult," she said slowly. "It's very terrible and painful for you, Mr. Buchan. But will you not bring the children up and let me give them tea?"

"No, Miss Nimmo," said the shipbuilder firmly, rising. "I just brought them down here to give them a change, to help them to forget. If you don't mind me saying it, I'm afraid the sight of you would bring it all back. You were very good with them and poor Janet."

He started to move towards the door and then hesitated.

"In fact," he said, "I didn't come up here to bother you with my troubles. It was another thing altogether. Will you

tell me frankly, Miss Nimmo? Have you been getting anonymous letters?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Ness faltered.

"I thought so," said Andrew Buchan quietly. "I've always had a portable at home for my work, and when . . . when the trouble came on us . . . I found a sort of draft lying about: something that seemed to be addressed to you."

"We can forget all that now," said Ness quickly. "I won't give it another thought. It's only a dreadful thing that it should have come on poor Janet that way, and then on you so terribly."

He gave her a close look and smiled, intimately and sadly.

"I knew you would understand, Miss Nimmo. You have been a good neighbour of ours. There aren't so many friends about when you're in real trouble. But I must get down the road and see that the children are all right."

It was easy enough to pass the news of Janet Buchan's illness to Duggie and Kit when they came home at length; not so easy, so great her relief on that score, to keep from blurting out the tale of the anonymous letters. When the young people were gone to bed, Ness had to wait up late for Olly's return; she could not wait till to-morrow to tell him of the strange and tragic fashion in which they had been delivered from the bondage of indecency. When he came at length, near midnight, it was unhappily plain that his entertainment had been generous. Olly was never incoherent, but Ness knew all the signs in the vagueness of his eyes, the largeness of his gestures and the ornateness of his courtesies.

"Ever so sorry, my dear lady!" he apologised, bowing with extreme grace. "Too bad to keep you so late. Shouldn't have waited up for me. But I must say I've had a delightful day with Sir Utrick; absolutely delightful! Charming fellow. You'd like to meet him."

"I'm sure I'd like to," Ness agreed. "But I really waited up to tell you something important. I had a visitor this afternoon . . ."

Olly, holding to the back of a chair for protection against his inclination to sway, heard the story of Andrew and Janet Buchan with open eyes.

"'Stonishing!" he exclaimed at length. "I'd never have

guessed. It simply proves what I've always said—you never can tell when it comes to people. Dashed bad luck for Buchan, I must say. However, that's off our minds. Seems to me the best thing is to get to bed and have a jolly good sleep."

Ness, shaking and bashing the cushions for the last time, thought how wonderful it must be to possess a mind that could so easily, even gracefully, discover short-cuts through the jungle. For herself, at least, there was still in the air an uneasiness she could not define.

CHAPTER FIVE

THREE SISTERS

I

MRS. CULLEN, the doctor's wife, looked from behind the curtains of her drawing-room and under the overhanging arms of a copper beech outside and wondered idly why that Nimmo woman, the one with the fortune from the Pools, should stand so long at the corner and look down the length of Stornoway Street towards her own tenement home. She had bought herself a dog, too. Funny way to exercise a dog, standing at a corner staring.

The interest of the doctor's wife in the spectacle was slight and transient. She had enough of her own to worry about. Her vigil behind the curtains was for her husband. Oh, he would come in with his apologies and a fancy tale of a prolonged consultation, but he would be stinking of that woman's cocktails just the same ! One of his wealthy patients, if you please ; Mrs. Frank Summers of Invermay. Mrs. Cullen knew what was wrong with that bitch, also the cure, if only she could get at her without open scandal and the ruin of the practice. There was the telephone again ; it would be old Ma Prentice in the act of dying for the third time within the hour. A damned fine life a doctor's wife's, Mrs. Cullen didn't think.

If she had faintly envied Ness Nimmo her single state and her private fortune, Ness on her part would have wondered what there was to envy. Her hesitation at the corner was out of confusion of mind and lack of purpose. The silly dog must have its evening run for the relief of nature, but it was for the woman a device to escape, even for a short space of minutes, from No. 20. Now she looked back, considering the grey bulk of the tenement building, only one of a long block that, running downhill on the other side of the street from where she stood, had the look of a penitentiary ; and she was baffled to know exactly why her state should be one of such timorous con-

fusion. She was killing time, she was evading something that was still inevitable.

The wail and throb of some nearly tuneless piece of swing music came rolling up the canyon between the parallel lines of tenement buildings. That was the Munsie's, who had followed the poor old Merriweather's in the second floor, left. They were in the fish and chip line and reputed to have made a small fortune out of sailors and soldiers during the war. A rough lot—two obese parents and four blowsy, loud, cheerful girls with peroxide tresses and roguish hips. A smile flitted across Ness's lovely features as she recalled how Kit and she had been in the giggles for an hour after Olly, flicking the moustache, had mildly remarked: "These Munsie people . . . Rather bring down the tone of the place, don't you think?"

There was no stopping their wireless. It seemed to be the necessary background of the Munsie existence, and they needed to have it loud and prolonged. Everybody round about objected to its dominance, and it was a queer thing, thought Ness, the communal spirit was so far in decay that no solid protest was ever made. Even Quin's recurrent threat to write a stiff lawyer's letter was never carried out. Anyhow, thought Ness morosely, it didn't make life in No. 20 Stornoway Street any easier to bear. Here and now, nevertheless, she must go back to the attic flat, spend the evening somehow, sleep there and go on doing so until—well, until what?

"Come, Rags," she said to the dog, flicking at its lead.

Oh, yes! she had bought a dog, on a whim of which she could not understand the significance. The advertisement had been in the first edition of the *Courier*, and she had walked right across the town and up into the dim regions about Auchmithie to bargain and chat with a dirty, one-eyed old man and, for the sum of six pounds, acquire a fond, foolish, gutless and irresistibly charming cocker spaniel. She had tried to walk it home on a lead of dirty string provided by the dirty ancient, but had been forced, by the silly brute's trick of squatting on its haunches, to carry it most of the way in her arms, her chin continually licked by a long, wet and hopeful tongue.

She remembered Kit's searching look and her sharp remark:

"A dog, Ness? I should have thought the likes of Olly and me were enough."

"Can't I buy a dog if I want to?"

"Of course, Ness, of course. And isn't he a silly duck? Aren't you, Rags—mufflums, delicious! Now, don't lick my goggles off!"

That was how the spaniel got its name; but Ness could never forget how her little sister, too clever by half, had discerned the uneasiness behind the impulse. It was poetic justice that, of all the people in the house, the dog should cleave particularly to Duggie, when he was at home. Quin was apt to make wild shots at kicking it when the brute came within range of his short sight, and now at his every appearance Rags ran upstairs to the door of Ness's attic room and lay on the mat, watchful and tremulous, his nose between his paws.

She carried the spaniel up the dark stairs, so foolish was it about smells and things, and entered the silent house. Everybody out; Olly at the Club, still the National, though now quite scathing about its amenities and the company to be met there; Kit at a brief, autumnal session of tennis; Quin, this being a Tuesday, paying one of his now twice-weekly visits to the Sclanders household; Duggie, goodness knew where. There was an ironing to do; she had thought of stoning some late plums for jam. Everybody in the house hated stones in jam.

Instead, she went into the sitting-room and lit the gas-fire, for the September nights were growing chilly. She drew back the easy-chairs and ruefully considered their shabbiness. She rustled a cushion here and there and flicked at the curtains. The spaniel, snuffling at her heels, she sharply ordered to go and lie down, and the beast slinked off to curl up in Duggie's favourite basket-chair in the kitchen.

Ness followed Rags into the kitchen and surveyed the garments on the pulley. She thought what a nuisance it was to have to heat her irons on the gas-cooker; an electric iron seemed at the moment one of the most desirable things in life, but when could one hope for the electricity in No. 20 Stornoway Street: when the Misses McJannet were dead and gone, perhaps. So she did nothing but pick up an evening paper one of the men had left behind and looked at the pictures.

The front-door bell rang on its coiled spring above her head.

So it was as she had apprehended : that vague apprehension which had held her waiting on the corner across from the doctor's house. This was the third week since the return from Ardmillan ; and twice a week since then, each Tuesday and each Friday, Andrew Buchan had climbed the stairs to spend the evening in a social and neighbourly way. She would never herself have noticed anything odd about that, if that brat Kit had not perceived and, of course, remarked on the regularity of the shipbuilder's custom. Here was the Tuesday of the third week, and here was Andrew Buchan on her doorstep, large, kind, pitiful, shy.

" Oh, good evening, Mr. Buchan ! " she greeted him. " Come in, won't you ? I've just lit the fire in the sitting-room. "

" Thank you, Miss Nimmo. I've got the youngsters away to bed, and Peggy can look after herself. It's a bit quiet down there nowadays, a bit lonely. "

" I'm sure it is. Sit down, Mr. Buchan, and light your pipe. I've got a rare pile of darning to do. "

It was all according to custom, as if they had worked out a decent, middle-aged ritual. Their talk was simple and easy : of neighbourly affairs, of the Munsies' wireless, of small and recurrent local scandals, of houses in the West End bought and sold, of the new minister at St. Mark's, of Mr. Attlee and Mr. Churchill and the incomprehensible ways of those Russians. After an hour of it Ness said she would make a cup of tea, and Andrew Buchan protested, and Ness said she always liked a cup of tea at this particular hour of the evening ; and when she returned with the tray she had braced herself to ask, in a suitably subdued tone, how Janet was keeping.

" No better, I'm afraid, " said Andrew Buchan, shaking his head. " It's just a question of waiting and hoping for the best. "

He never had more than that to say of his stricken wife. Some sharp people, like Kit, might have been tempted to think that this big shipbuilding man faintly enjoyed the status, of martyr and the subtleties of his relationship to a case of mental illness. This night, as they sat together in comfortable

converse, Ness was moved to advance a trouble of her own against his massive and innocent satisfaction of affliction.

"It's difficult, very difficult, for us all," she said, snapping a thread of darning wool. "There's something worrying me rather badly."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Miss Nimmo," returned the honest man warmly. "What is it, now, if you don't mind me asking?"

"It's Bambi. Do you remember Bambi?"

"Oh, yes! A bonnie girl."

He spoke with restrained enthusiasm of a bright lady who had not so long ago set all the town's gossips by the ears.

"I suppose you know she made a silly marriage, as I thought at least, and now she writes the most unhappy letters. Poor Bambi was so fond of fun, too fond perhaps, and now she's wearying her heart out in some hovel of a small farm in Maryland. She hates the place, and she hates her husband's people. I don't know what it is. They may be cruel to her; she may be ill. I just know that she's desperately unhappy, and I wish I could get at the truth."

This was for Ness an unusually vehement and sustained confidence, and Andrew Buchan accepted it gravely. He leaned forward towards his hostess.

"I wonder you don't go out there and see for yourself, Miss Nimmo," he said, an undertone of reproof in his voice.

"Go out there—to America! Me!"

"Yes, why not? It's so easy nowadays. You'll get a plane from Prestwick any night and be over there next day. And I don't suppose the expense matters so much to you."

Ness was silent for a while, stunned and illuminated at once. It was so brilliantly daring, this suggestion, so utterly simple. To see Bambi again, to have the poor pretty fool in her arms once more, to hear the truth, perhaps to bring her home out of the vast and alien world to which she had been committed on a gust of passion!

"I must think about it," she faltered.

"Yes, you should think about it," he urged her anxiously.

"I don't quite know all the ropes about passports and visas and reservations, but I'll see our secretary to-morrow. He's used to arranging these trips for the directors. Perhaps if I

could look up towards the end of the week and let you know the details . . .”

“ I’d be very grateful if you would, Mr. Buchan. It’s just a bit difficult to get used to the idea.”

“ It’s a commonplace nowadays. For better or for worse.”

He rose to go. The door opened and Duggie’s dark face looked round its edge. He nodded indifferently to the guest.

“ Good evening ! ”

“ Good evening, Duggie ! Had a good day ? ”

“ I’ve had a perfectly lousy day. Is there anything to eat in the kitchen, Ness ? ”

“ You know where to look.”

“ Okay.”

Duggie had been shockingly rude to her guest—Duggie of all people ! She knew well that something must have happened to upset him. In fact, two of his ex-Commando lads had got gloriously tight in a seaside bar and had run his best boat full tilt into a concrete jetty at Rathmore : the very boat earmarked for the Post Office job. You couldn’t spare chaps like that ; and they could only grin like apes when he poured a bottle of acid over them. Blasted, bloody, dear fools, rather like this cow of a cocker spaniel that snuffled, rolled on its back and clawed at his ankles while he tried to brew a mug of char.

Ness went upstairs to her room, mortified. It was nearly dark now, and the lights were coming up in the little town across the water, but she had no eyes for the sombre beauty of the autumn night. It was Duggie—Duggie of all people !—openly showing hostility to her friend, poor Andrew Buchan. It was too bad. She was angry enough to screw up courage to go downstairs again and face him in the kitchen.

He lay asprawl in the basket-chair, the spaniel curled up on his stomach.

“ Duggie, I’ve got to speak to you frankly,” she began.

“ Shoot, sister,” he drawled.

“ Oh, cheap American slang won’t help us ! ” Ness snapped petulantly. “ It’s just that you were rude, abominably rude, to Andrew Buchan. You of all people—to my guest ! ”

Her dark brother was relentless in his hostile indifference. He did not budge from his inelegant posture.

“ Well, if you must have the truth, Ness,” he said, “ that

big guy gets me down. He's so damned dull and sure of himself. Does he think he's going to hang up his hat here?"

"Oh, Duggie! Duggie!"

Her protest ended on a wail, and she fled, again to the big room upstairs. If it had been Quin—but it was Duggie, somehow roused to sharp criticism, expressing for Quin and Kit and, no doubt, Olly, their hostile views of Andrew Buchan's visits and purposes and so of herself. It was too bad, too cruel; and yet it was what she had feared: the thing that had kept her dithering at a street corner with a fool of a cocker spaniel at her feet. Lord, but life could set the most damnable trap for the simple-minded! You needed to be a fly, hard man like Quin to get through the jungle.

Ness found that she was crying. The lights across the water, the regular line along that esplanade four miles away making a diamond necklet round the throat of the night, swam out of focus through her tears. So helpless this woman called Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo, so securely trapped within her own inhibitions.

She heard her people come in one by one—Kit soft and quick on her rubber-soled shoes; Quin quicker, but jerky and slamming; Olly quiet and orderly. She dried her eyes, powdered her face and went down to face them.

"By the way, everybody," she announced with the harshness of her own indecision, "I'm afraid you'll have to arrange for your own lunches to-morrow. I'm going off early on a bit of business, and I won't be back till the late afternoon."

"It happens that I am going to Edinburgh," said Quin, as much as to say that that was that.

"Okay by me," drawled Duggie, stroking the spaniel's head. "I'll be half-way down the Firth before one of you has batted an eyelid."

"You and I will have lunch together, Mr. Pomphrey," said Kit quickly and with faintly brittle enthusiasm. "And it'll be jolly good too."

"I'll bet it will, Kit!" cried Olly, loyal.

"Well, that's all arranged," said Ness, but rather emptily. "I think I'll go to bed now."

She knew that she was being followed out of the kitchen by Kit's shrewd and speculative eyes; nor did she sleep until

all the others were long away between the sheets : Duggie and Olly snoring in ludicrous competition.

2

It seemed that she was accepted as one of their regulars by the officers of the cross-river ferry steamer. The purser bobbed and grinned behind the tiny window of his office.

"Morning, Miss Nimmo ! Glad to see you travelling again. The usual, I suppose, cabin return ? Fine autumn we're having. But we'll pay for it yet, I suppose."

The captain recognised her from the bridge and gave her a highly complicated greeting, in which a bow, a lifting of his skipped cap and a naval salute were subtly mingled. The tide being low, the first mate helped her up the steep gangway to the pier on the other side, his large Highland hand gripping her arm firmly above the elbow—as if she was a doddering old creature with short sight. The purser thanked her for her surrender of the outward half of her ticket, and the captain repeated his complex obeisance from the bridge.

The house agency she had come to visit was, oddly enough, a special department of a large chemist's shop, informed by the mingled odours of iodoform and talc powder. It was managed by a lean, sallow man in dark clothes that were matched by a dark chin : as if no amount of shaving could possibly overtake the growth of his beard. He enjoyed his own sardonic humour in the Scots fashion.

"Houses, miss ? Plenty of houses. At a price," and he spread out his arms and talon-like hands.

"I expected that. But what sort of prices ?"

"Three thousand, four thousand, five thousand, six thousand and up. And ye'll not get much for three thousand, barring a flat. It's India, you see."

"India ?"

"Us packing up out there, and in Burma and these places. They're here by the dozen—soldiers, policemen, railway chaps, civil servants and the whole rick-matick. Awful *pukka*, too—snap your nose off if you try on a wee joke. It's an English colony, that's what it's coming to. Heavens, ye'd need an

Oxford education to understand the half they're sayin' ! Anyhow, it's them that's boostin' up the prices. That's okay by us here—but the prices ! It's fair daft."

"I can afford to pay a good price," said Ness, "but I'm not going to pay any sort of price for anything."

"It was you that won the big Pools prize, wasn't it ?" asked the man candidly.

"Oh lord ! Has that got to follow me about everywhere ?" asked Ness.

"Ye canna escape it, miss," said the house agent. "Losh, if I won forty thousand in the Pools, you could keep askin' me till kingdom come ! But there was just something that came into my head, you bein' kind of local like. Wait a tick, now."

The house agent half-closed his eyes and seemed to pass into a sort of trance.

"There's The Airns. I've just remembered it. It's a queer kind o' place, but it might be the very ticket for the likes of you. Here"—he started out of the trance into confidential activity—"I'll take you up the road myself and let you see it. Wullie ! Look after the desk for a while," he bawled to an unseen assistant. "I'm taking this lady up to see The Airns."

Having ascertained that this virile person's name was the unusual one of Lynas, Ness watched him clap a bowler hat on his head and followed his wave through the swing-doors of the chemist's shop into the street.

"Oh, help ! Look at it ! There's India for you."

Mr. Lynas rudely indicated a tall and slender person standing on the edge of the pavement outside a fish shop opposite. He wore khaki shorts, almost feminine in their extreme width and brevity. Pale khaki stockings with red garter-flashes ended in sandals ; above his open-necked khaki shirt the swarthy face was crowned by a pork-pie hat in green felt. To one of this person's arms was attached a piled shopping basket, to the other a lead with a spaniel, the spit of Rags, at the end of it. About the skinny legs played two children in blue and white striped jerseys and red rompers.

"It would make you laugh," said Mr. Lynas blithely. "That one was likely a brigadier or something, and he's nothing to do now but stand on the kerb and wait for the wife

to buy the kippers. And they're all great on gettin' their kids up like French sailors. Aye, they're queer folk, the English ! But it's pathetic, too—hundreds of big, upstanding chaps that used to kick the coolies round, kiddin' themselves on they're still country gentry with a couple of rows of early potatoes, a skep of bees and a spaniel. Some of the shopkeepers here could tell you some queer stories, I tell you."

Her companion's oration depressed Ness faintly. She wondered what he would have to say of Olly, keeping up old appearances in yachting rig as pathetic and funny as the ex-sahib's military remains. There were so many people in this new world who were sad and useless ; she regarded herself as belonging to their company. If she had ever believed in a Divine Providence, her faith would have been shattered by its incoherent choice of herself as the recipient of a fortune.

Mr. Lynas had meanwhile led her uphill from the shopping centre and along a street as quiet in the sunlight as the precincts of a cathedral. He turned a key in the lock of a battered garden gate set into a high wall of warm sandstone.

"This is the place," he said.

Ness afterwards suspected Mr. Lynas of a certain skill in showmanship with an æsthetic bias, for now she found herself looking with pleasure up a great length of old lawn to distant flower-beds and a trellis of ramblers and, beyond them, the discreet white frontage of a square Georgian house. There was a great tree in the middle of this long lawn, a weeping willow of exquisite grace nearer the house ; and she saw the apples hanging from other contorted trees round about her. She had an impression of roses still blooming to her left, on a dipping bank that ended in a confusion of bay, laurel and rhododendron.

"Is there a stream down there ?" she asked, pointing.

"Aye, a wee burn off the hill and plenty of small trout in it. Dash it !" cried Mr. Lynas wistfully, "you could make a rare water-garden down there. I'll tell you something, Miss Nimmo. When the wife and me were courting—and that wasn't yesterday—we used to peep through the big top gate and tell each other this was the house we would have one day. And," he added with a sardonic chuckle, "a fat lot of good that did us !"

"But it's lovely!" cried Ness.

"Aye, the garden part," Mr. Lynas allowed a thought sourly. "You've still got to see the house. You can see one of the snags from here—all these dashed terraces built round three sides, even if they're well screened by the trees. That was that dirty old devil, Macara; he made a fortune with his speculative building. See"—Mr. Lynas waved an enthusiastic black arm about him—"the house used to fill the whole block: stables, gardener's cottage and all the orders. It must have been a champion wee bit of property. Built near a hundred and fifty years ago by an old chap called Douglas; made money in America and settled here. This is one of his jobs."

Mr. Lynas smacked the furrowed bole of the great tree in the middle of the lawn.

"A tulip tree," he said. "There's not many of them in this part of the world. This is said to be a rare specimen. But come on . . ."

As they walked towards the door of the house, which Ness now saw to be fronted by a curving sweep of drive in which a car could handily turn and manœuvre, she said with a smile:

"Mr. Lynas, you're either a good salesman, or you're in love with this house yourself."

He stopped and faced her plainly, his keen black eyes narrowed and wrinkled with interest and pleasure.

"You're about right both ways, Miss Nimmo. That's clever of you. No wonder you beat the Pools."

Much later on Ness liked to wonder why, on one of her impulses, she had really decided to buy The Airns. There was the garden, of course, that long stretch of dreaming lawn. No man ever knew, except pragmatically, what flowers could mean to a woman, still less what the growing of her own flowers could mean to a woman out of an attic flat in a tenement building. To go out in the fresh of the forenoon and cut a bunch of sweet-peas! It was almost like buying a new dress. Then she had sometimes the funny, sentimental feeling that she wanted to preserve one of the secret dreams of the sardonic Mr. Lynas, who would be happy merely to know that the old, neglected, faintly insanitary house would be repaired and

repainted and gradually restored. She would think again of the steep sweep of the wooden handrail on the banisters of the staircase, and of Mr. Lynas running an affectionate hand down the brown wood and catching her eye earnestly, saying :

“There’s craftsmanship for you ! We’ll never see the like of it again.”

The little things had come to matter so much to her, like stone-paving all over the ground floor of The Airns and the exquisite proportions in which the Georgian builders fitted their multi-paned windows into the walls of tiny rooms. The rhythm of life, she thought to perceive, did not run in smooth waves as in the story-books. It was for her a pattern, stencilled in every conceivable colour, out of which you might pick, usually too late, that tiny flake of incident which was truly significant.

On her way back across the Firth by the afternoon boat, salaamed on board by the purser and again saluted by the captain on the bridge, she worried inevitably over her commitment to Mr. Lynas, even if it was only oral. The fear of money affrighted her again, and oh, the wrangles in prospect with Quin ! When she went straight from the steamer to consult her lawyers, it had to be old Mr. Gordon who saw her after a long wait in a room packed tight with law books and their peculiar smell : the senior partner in rather worse temper than usual, with both his juniors on holiday at once and having to deal with a lot of damned women, bees in every bonnet of them.

“A house across the water at Millig ? ” he repeated roughly. “Did you inquire as to the burdens—assessment, feu-duty, stipend ? No, I thought not. As for the title, I never liked the deeds of those old houses on the Lennox estate, and that’ll mean a search. Not one record in five is clean. Too much fancy speculative building over there.”

The crotchety old man might have been talking Yiddish for all that Ness could understand of his outburst, and she was suddenly angry.

“But I wish to buy the house, Mr. Gordon,” she said coldly. “I would like you to get an architect to look at it, and then you can deal with the solicitors on the other side about a price. It should be about three thousand, the agent

said. As for the titles or whatever you call them, it's a funny thing that the old lady who lives in The Airns has been sitting there for nearly fifty years without any trouble."

"Is that the way of it, then?" asked Mr. Gordon. It was something to meet a damned woman with her mind made up. "I mean, these are your instructions?"

"These are my instructions," said Ness with the sweetness of victory.

"Very well."

Mr. Gordon pressed a bell on his table and told the bullet-headed boy who answered it to show Miss . . . er . . . H'rm, H'rm, to the outer door. When his client had sailed from the room, tall and goodly of figure, he jotted a note on a pad and pinned it to Ness's note from Mr. Lynas. When young Spence came back on Monday he could damned well take up this confounded woman's business and forget his blasted holiday: cavorting all round the West Highlands in a yacht and sending damfool telegrams about being delayed by bad weather.

Going home, Ness breasted the stepped slope of Thorn Lane with a light heart. The thing was done at last. It was her own way of escape, and it had been opened to her by the coincidence of two of these little things—the sardonic sentimentality of Lynas, the ill manners of old Gordon—but it was done.

She started to invent a story to puzzle and exasperate Kit. She would hold the news back till it suited her, teasing Quin with an indication of something vital settled without his knowledge. She would rouse Olly to polite surprise with her ultimate announcement. As she turned into the close of No. 20 Stornoway Street she was thinking, with a tightening of gladness about her throat: From Martinmas, seven weeks hence, I shall have passed out of this dungeon, with its smells and its ghosts, for ever, and I shall have a wide, bright, high-walled garden of my own. As she crossed the middle landing she knew, but with an unhappy mixture of relief and regret, that soon Andrew Buchan would have no decent occasion to make regular evening calls and so commit her to misunderstanding with her own people.

Kit was alone in the house at this hour of late afternoon,

and Ness knew at once that there was no gay game of mystification to be played with the girl who sat in the kitchen, glumly perusing the early edition of the *Courier*. The spaniel in the basket-chair had only the will to raise its head, roll its treacly eyes and wag a stump of tail. It waited only for Duggie, essentially.

"Hallo, Ness!" she was greeted. "I hope you had a nice day. Mine has been lousy. Look at that."

Kit pulled a letter from her jumper pocket and threw it across the table.

"Why Bambi should write to me I don't know. You haven't forgotten to reply to her or anything?"

"I've written her regularly twice a week, air mail too!" cried Ness. "Twice a week for a year past. What does she say? Oh dear!"

"It's rather blush-making, I must say," observed Kit with the all-too-easy realism of the immature.

Bambi had left almost nothing unsaid. Here, unless she was going the way of Janet Buchan, was her case against her husband and life in the United States: from the crudity of relations with a man she bitterly described as "a hick" to the semi-public and bovine sanitary conventions at Palmer's Place; from the featurelessness of a parish the size of a Scottish county to the barbarity of rural entertainment; from the hostility of neighbours to the positive cruelty of a mother-in-law. The thing was plainly written in an unreasonable passion of unhappiness and frustration, all the more dreadful in reading like a half-crazed whine of self-pity across the Atlantic.

"Poor Bambi! Poor, poor Bambi!" sobbed Ness, roughly thrusting the letter back into its envelope. "I knew she was unhappy, but why give all these horrible details to you? Why didn't she tell me?"

"The last bit's only too easy to answer, Ness," said Kit gently. "She was always afraid of your opinion, as we all are—even Quin. It's just like not being able to tell your father or your mother the details of an experience that has horrified you. So she works it off on me, knowing that you will see it all sooner or later and understand."

"That's a terrible thing to say, Kit!"

"My dear, it's a terrible letter, whichever way you look at it."

Her picture of the fair garden at The Airns was wiped clean off the slate of Ness's mind. She had merely glimpsed it long ago, in a dream. She temporised with Kit.

"I wonder if I shouldn't go across. After all, I can afford it easily. I'm told you can get a plane from Prestwick any night. Do you think I should go across, Kit?"

The girl rose to fill the kettle at the sink: a stage direction of her own device that allowed her to observe quietly:

"I think you should, Ness. You can't be happy until you know the facts. Don't worry about the men; I'll look after them. So long as you're home again within three weeks. You could almost hop it in a long week-end."

3

Mhairi and Quin had the drawing-room of Lindisfarne to themselves for the evening and were both deliciously aware of the possibilities of their situation. Mrs. Sclanders had announced with purposeful clarity that she was stepping down the road to see her old friend, Mrs. John Stirling, recovering from an operation to do with the gall bladder, and that supper would therefore be later than usual. The young people, she suggested, would no doubt hear her coming in.

The fire was burning bright in the well grate, and the standard lamp over against the piano filled the room with a discreet pink glow. The faintly flashy richness of the furnishings, the soft gilt-tasselled cushions and fussy little feminine mats on the arms of the easy-chairs, ministered pleasantly to Quin's appreciation of property values. The woman on the other side of the fireplace, gauzily dressed, her head discreetly bent over an obviously intimate job of stitching, like any girl preparing her trousseau—this presence made an appeal of sweet companionship to the soul of a man who was, in fact, much alone in his cleverness. Between them the empty chesterfield luxuriantly suggested a point of ecstatic meeting, the right confessional of the understanding as yet undeclared.

Mhairi on her part calmly and decently awaited the approach

of the situation she had long rehearsed in her mind. She was watchful and patient as well as hopeful, knowing well that come it must, sooner or later. She said :

“How quiet the house seems when Mam’s not in !”

Quin gravely agreed with this ambiguous proposition, but remarked that it was pleasant to be quiet.

“I think a good fire makes all the difference,” ventured Mhairi. “I almost like the winter coming.”

“And can spring be far behind ?” asked Quin, lingering over the cadence.

“That was a lovely story,” said Mhairi wistfully.

Quin braced himself and spoke out boldly but in gentle tones, leaning forward earnestly.

“Mhairi, could we not make a lovely story of our own ? Could we not have a fireside of our own ?”

“Quin !” she cried, fluttering her rather pale eyelashes in his direction.

The moment was upon her, and Quin was upon his knees before her, clutching her hands—possibly the last male British citizen to plead his case in this elegant and traditional manner. She averted her head a little and rejoiced in the blushes she could feel coursing up her neck and over her cheeks. Anon, when he was finished with the statement of his case, she lowered her eyes and considered her lap. Then she raised her head proudly and looked away over and above the gaze of his eager, glistening spectacles in the direction of the standard lamp, in the manner of one who considers profoundly the inwardness of this, our life.

“Quin . . . Oh, my darling ! Yes, yes ! It had to be.”

In a flash she was transported to the chesterfield, and there they embraced closely and kissed endlessly, firmly convinced like all lovers before them, that never, never in the history of mankind had man and woman loved so passionately, so truly, so unselfishly. The minutes, more than an hour of them, flashed past the comprehension of this couple, virgin and belated entrants upon the fields of asphodel. For all the warm imaginings of Mhairi, she had never approached an apprehension of the fierce splendours of confession and surrender that now lapped her in ecstasy.

She jerked from the embrace as an outer door slammed

decisively and jumped to her feet, a proper sight with hair dishevelled and the upper reaches of her garments in disarray.

"There's Mam!" she gasped. "I must run and tidy. Darling, will you speak to her now?"

Mrs. Sclanders entered her drawing-room with a sort of wary decision, her dark and ugly face alert.

"Where's Mhairi?" she asked quite sharply.

"I think she's gone through to her room for a moment. In fact, Mrs. Sclanders, I should like to have a private word with you about Mhairi and—well—myself."

"What is this?" asked the hostess.

With detachment she began to tidy up the disarray of the chesterfield, its wrinkled covers and shapeless cushions betraying the intensity of the emotional struggle of which it had been so lately the scene. Her grim visage gave the suitor no encouragement, and in the circumstances Quin's exposition of his devotion to Mhairi, of his wish to make her his wife, and of his financial capacity to maintain her in the comfortable state to which she had been accustomed was a small forensic masterpiece. Mrs. Sclanders appreciated it as such.

"So you two think you are in love? Well," she remarked with justice and accuracy, "I think it's a very good match. Just one thing, Mr. Nimmo," she added, boggling over the formality, "I'd like Mhairi's settlement to be put in black and white. She's all I've got, and there's a tidy bit of property with her when I'm gone."

This was a woman after Quin's heart, and he assured Mrs. Sclanders that these considerations had been long in his mind, even suggesting the employment of an independent firm of solicitors. When Mhairi came in with the supper tray, flushed and tremulous, the matron, grimly jocular, cried:

"What's this I hear about you and Quin, Mhairi Sclanders? I've just been telling Quin that I think it's a very good match. Now, can you not put down the tray without spilling the milk? There we are, then."

She kissed her daughter, but she did not suffer a tear to escape her eyes. She moved on her thick, brisk legs towards the door.

"Don't pour the tea yet, Mhairi," she advised. "Just wait a minute, both of you."

While she was out of the room the lovers kissed lightly and sweetly, Mhairi's eyes passing in the act out of focus in the manner she hoped could be described as melting. They were both being nervous over the teacups when Mrs. Sclanders came stumping across the hall and into the room with a decanter of South African sherry and glasses on a silver salver.

"This is an occasion," she announced.

Quin walked home that evening as if, he would fain have phrased it, he walked on air. The night was surly, a high wind sending whorls of autumn leaves about his legs, an occasional slash of rain ripping along the pavements of those deserted West End streets, but they were without power to abate his self-satisfaction. Still in his nostrils was the ponderous odour of Mhairi's face powder; he took pleasure in the superficial bruising his lips and nose had suffered in their frequent collisions with the corresponding features of his beloved.

Ness, Kit and Olly were enjoying a snack meal in the kitchen when he reached the attic flat, and he beamed on them from the doorway.

"You're late, Quin," observed Ness. "Will you have a cup of tea?"

Quin's benevolent smile persisted, his shortsighted eyes rather fatuous behind the thick glasses.

"Quin, you've gone and got engaged!" cried Kit, suddenly illuminated.

"You might leave me to make my own announcement," he replied with a touch of the old sharpness, "but it happens to be true. Mhairi and I are engaged, Ness."

"Quin, dear! Oh, how nice! Congratulations."

"Good egg, Quin!" from Kit. "First of the Nimmo males off the shelf!"

"Congratulations, Quin. Well done, by Jove!" said Olly more ceremoniously, rising to shake the betrothed by the hand. "And a jolly nice girl, too!"

"Well, I deserve a cup of tea," Quin suggested.

"Tea!" cried Olly. "On an occasion like this! Kit, if you will get out some glasses, I've got a bottle of a particularly nice Amontillado in my room. Kept it specially for a moment like this. And dashed if that isn't old Duggie coming in! He'll enjoy a tot of this stuff, I know."

While Olly was fetching his precious bottle and Kit the glasses ; when Duggie had nearly winded Quin with his congratulatory slap on the back, Ness said anxiously :

" I'll have to pay a call on Mrs. Sclanders and Mhairi. I suppose I ought to go along to-morrow."

" Yes, that would be expected," said Quin magisterially. " To-morrow afternoon, I think. I'll ring them from the office and let them know to expect you."

Then Olly returned with his bottle and made a great to-do about opening it without damage to the exquisite ephers it contained ; and the glasses were filled and raised ; and Quin's and Mhairi's joint happiness was proposed in one of Olly's formal little speeches and unanimously hoped for ; and Quin melted to the kindness about him, and everybody was honestly happy about the great family event. Olly, immensely pleased with his little contribution to the feast, solemnly asked Ness if she did not think, as he himself would maintain against the most extreme expert opinion, that this drop of Amontillado, none of your South African muck, was something to remember.

" It's lovely, Mr. Pomphrey ! " she duly returned. " Not too sweet, not too dry—so *clean*."

" The very word ! " approved the paying guest. Flicking at the amber moustache, he addressed the company in general. " It's a very strange thing, but you quite often find that a woman, especially if she does not smoke much or drink those filthy arrangements of gin and stuff—I say, you often find that a woman has a more exquisite palate for a good wine than the average run of men. Extraordinary ! "

" That's very interesting, Mr. Pomphrey," said Ness, " but there's one thing I'd like to tell you when we're all here. It matters to everybody, now that Quin is engaged. But I think I'm buying a house on the other side of the water."

" You *think* ! " exclaimed Quin.

" What I mean is," she fought to be calm, " I have actually looked over one I like very much, and the lawyers are now looking at the titles or the searches or something."

" What you mean," observed Quin primly, " is that they are examining the Title. The fact that they suggest a Search doesn't reassure me. However, Ness, you didn't see fit to

mention this before. I think I'm entitled to point out that the prospects of almost every one of us may be affected."

Duggie shifted violently in his basket chair.

"Just how seriously?" he growled. "There are plenty of ferries to take you backwards and forwards until you're spliced. Cheer up, Ness; it'll suit me okay, rather better than here."

"Is it really a nice house, Ness?" piped Kit.

"Don't interrupt, child. Of course it's a nice house. I wouldn't think of it if it wasn't. It's lovely . . . Oh, dear! Where was I?"

"Approximately," said Quin, now returning to his nastiest, "you were about to try to explain why you want this house, and why this is the first we've heard of it."

"Aw, put a sock in it!" murmured Duggie, winking encouragement at Ness.

"Why you haven't heard of it before," retorted Ness sharply, with a warning glance at Kit, "is because I've had something else on my mind; and I think, Quin, you might give me some credit for sparing you a good deal of worry."

"Good show, Miss Nimmo!" Olly encouraged her vaguely, but thus cunningly easing the strain. "I must say this is really a very excellent tippie."

His pause to sip again at his glass gave Ness time to reorganise her resources.

"I'm sure it suits everybody to get out of this horrible tenement. I know," she said almost viciously, "that I've had quite enough of it."

She was encouraged by a murmur of approval and by Quin's silence.

"As for the other thing, I don't want to stay in this place any longer. Really," she looked round the faces that constituted the solid family circle, "I wonder if you know what it is to be notorious in a place like this: every shopkeeper and bus conductor smarming round you, because you won a big prize in the Pools; being pointed out; sniffed at by the nice respectable ladies. . . . No, thank you! I'm going to shift my camp, and I think it will be perfectly convenient for everybody in the long run."

This quite remarkably lengthy and cogent exposition was

received by Ness's friends with a brief tribute of surprised silence. This was broken by Quin, and with surprising tolerance.

"That's a perfectly fair statement, Ness. I hadn't seen it quite clearly from your point of view. Naturally, I don't know when the marriage will take place, but I'll fit in somehow. A really decent house on the other side is always a sound investment. That is, if the Title is really clean."

Ness turned to her paying guest and asked with a smile: "What do you think, Mr. Pomphrey?"

In the very moment of asking she realised that she was posing to the lodger a question of extreme intimacy and sharpness. Either she was assuming poor Olly to be one of her chattels or inviting, even challenging, him to uproot himself from that small corner of God's earth in which he had his feeble foundations.

"To be perfectly frank, Miss Nimmo," he returned, "I'm not at all sure that I'd be awfully keen to live on the other side. In fact, if you don't mind, I'd like to give it a good bit of hard thinking. It would be too dashed bad," he eagerly admitted, "if we had to—you know the old phrase—break up the happy home."

He poured the last of the Amontillado into Duggie's glass and his own.

"Salve!" he said. "A dashed nice wine. But what I suggest, Miss Nimmo, is that we all have a jolly good sleep on it before we say any more. What about bed for you, young Kit?"

4

It seemed disastrous that the happy home was to be broken up: that one of the consequences which flowed so strangely from her access of fortune should be Olly's decision that he could not, after all, see his way to share with the family the new house across the water.

He was kindly firm about it. Though she thought his decision ridiculous on all practical grounds, Ness was quick to perceive that the man had inflexible motives behind him, and

miserably she wondered what on earth they could be. He came to her for what he called a serious talk as she was turning out the dining-room on the forenoon after Quin's announcement and all the others had left the house.

"So I'm most extremely sorry, Miss Nimmo, I need hardly say—" he concluded a speech that had been carefully studied—"but I think I'll start to look for other rooms and stay here where all my interests are. It's a most confounded pity, but there it is."

She could have cried in his face. In her blessed, idiotic innocence, as a matter of habit, she had taken Olly into account in her bid for The Airns ; she had even thought with affectionate regard that he would like the change to a larger, self-contained house in a more elegant social setting. It was bitter to realise, when one had done one's best, that the individual is always incalculable, always contradicting all the assumptions, a secret entity. It was immediately a catastrophe that, after all these years of a familiar and agreeable way of living, the paying guest should elect to withdraw from the fabric of existence they had all built up together, and, in so doing, destroy it.

"But, Mr. Pomphrey," Ness pleaded, "if I had thought for a moment that you wouldn't like the change, I should never have dreamt of moving to the other side. I see now that it was very stupid and selfish of me not to consult you. Anyhow, that's that. I'll go down this forenoon and tell the lawyers to cancel the whole thing. Unless," she hesitated, "you would like to make a change in any case. That I'd perfectly understand, though I'd be sorry."

"No, no, no !" Olly waved the nicotine-stained fingers of his right hand in the air as he paced the room. "You misunderstand me, Miss Nimmo. I seem to be complaining, but not at all. I knew jolly well that you wished to leave this place and cross the water—and jolly good luck to you, say I ! Quite right. It's simply that, at my age—well, you know what it is. . . . Can't teach old dogs new tricks ; all that sort of thing."

Ness ran a feather duster listlessly along the shelf of the chiffonier-bookcase, making time to consider how she could decently put to this kindly man what irked her most of all.

"I'm sure you'll see," she found the words at length, "that I've put myself—and you—in an impossible position. All that money is really yours. And now I've gone and used it—just to make this mess!"

"Miss Nimmo, really!" Olly protested. "I do think I may remind you that we had all this out once before. It was your investment. I filled up the forms to amuse myself. It might have been any one of the five of us in this house; might have been little Kit, old Duggie, even Quin; might have been me. I must say I was delighted when the spot of luck came your way, absolutely delighted. Upon my Sam, I can't think why you should worry at all!"

Ness had manœuvred herself so that she appeared to be very busy at the sideboard, her back to the paying guest, lest he should be troubled to see her tears, but there came a ring at the door bell, and she hurried out to receive from a telegraph messenger, with coltish hair sprouting from under a small uniform cap, the cable from Baltimore.

5

Anxiety set itself against fear, and there was only an emptiness left of the conflict; and from this spiritual void you had still to appreciate the ridiculous nature of the situation: a spinster of nearly middle age, alone, racing westwards across the Atlantic in an air-liner that was but a speck in the dark and empty spaces some two miles above the pitiless wastes of the ocean.

She was distracted also by the interest of her physical sensations, the actuality of them as against her tremulous imaginings beforehand. They were faintly sickening, the throb and thrum of engines, and the feeling that the plane was something ludicrously suspended from the skies on a thick string of elastic. The sudden, alarming bumps and collapses apart, there was always that feeling of going up a slight curve and down again: like being on a mild but endless scenic railway.

It was wildly exciting, too—herself among all these people in the deep seats, hastening to the States on one pretext or

another : some anxious like herself in anticipation, some happy in the prospect of reunion, some calm and bored, like men you might meet any morning on a suburban tram, but perhaps just a little (Ness suspected) putting on the air of having done it again and again, what with their newspapers, cigars, and orders for drinks to the air hostess.

That title struck Ness as a silly one. Stewardess, yes ; but air hostess was fanciful and silly, like a bit of a Hollywood picture. It irritated Ness that this pretty young female, her nubile configurations emphasised by her well-cut uniform in blue serge, saw fit, or had been tutored, to move among the passengers with excessive concern for their feelings and comfort, oozing assurance and smooth, ritual phrases. As if any rational person, deciding to fly to America, had not weighed all the risks and gone through all the alarms beforehand ! One, decided Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo at the age of thirty-eight, was not just a child to be mechanically cossetted by a chit who had never even heard of Bleriot : the pioneer Frenchman of whom Wee Captain Slocum would talk endlessly, marvelling till the day of his death that the aeroplane could make a faster sea-crossing than a ship.

Then you drowsed to the throb and thrum and drone of the machine and its four engines. Never for long, for you had swift nightmarish dreams of catastrophe, always as the plane fell into a pocket. You wondered about the pilot and his private life ; as a woman, you felt sorry for the poor boy out there in the nose of the machine, his good eyes and strong young hands between you and death. But probably he had a bonnie little wife and a baby boy back at home, and you were agreeably sure that he wouldn't do anything silly ; though (thought Ness, remembering the ways of Duggie) the Lord help ordinary, simple-doing folk when young men got bits of machinery to play about with !

The air hostess came up the aisle with the synthetic grin on her enamelled countenance and reminded all who would listen to her sweet whisper that they were losing against the clock on the westward journey, and that watches might be put back an hour for the time being. . . . Duggie had explained all that days before. Did these people imagine that an air traveller for the first time was naturally a dolt ? Perhaps they

had to carry their share of fools. That was why it was called Service, with a capital S : saving the stupid the trouble of thinking for themselves.

Duggie—reflected Ness, her eyes closing again in weariness—had been so excited about her trip, bubbling over with his Airborne knowledge ; and Quin had been good about getting her traveller's cheques, her credits with the Chase National Bank, her passport and all the rest of it put through. It was strange now, looking back on the proceedings from this point of suspension above the Atlantic, that Andrew Buchan had done the really effective work on her behalf.

In such a situation dear Olly was dramatically ineffective. But Andrew Buchan, duly consulted in the emergency, had taken it as a job of engineering, of logistics. His friend, Miss Nimmo, had good reason to be in the States as soon as could be contrived ; so the considerable commercial influence of Tod & Bannerman, shipbuilders in Garvel, was thrown into the business of booking an air passage, expediting the passport, obtaining the visa and providing a list of what were called "contacts" in New York, Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago.

"I think that should about cover you, Miss Nimmo," Andrew Buchan had said in his practical way. "If you're ever really stuck, our New York people will see you through. They've been advised."

He had driven her down to the airport in one of T. & B.'s office cars, with Kit as chaperon, and seen her through the formalities. The smart girls at the reception desks, who would have terrified Ness alone, lost much of their professional glitter in the presence of the tall, solid, handsome man in the ship-builder's bowler hat ; this was not a nonentity to be snapped at, but a somebody to be pleased, and no damned feminine nonsense about it. (As he moved away from the counter, one hand protectively under Ness's elbow, the bright girls glanced at each other with raised, plucked eyebrows and wondered what the relationship might be.) When the loud-hailers hollowly announced the aircraft waiting on the runway, Andrew Buchan's hand was again under Ness's left elbow as they stepped out into the glaring lights and moved, as to the guillotine, towards the massive machine. Her last memory of

home was his uplifted face, and his big hand waving reassurance. For all the fervour of her hug and kisses, Kit seemed to have been a figure in the background.

Ness's gratitude to Andrew Buchan for his kindness was great, but now, in the tedious emptiness of the skyways, his influence thinned behind the plane like the exhaust from its four mighty engines, and she wondered emptily what lay ahead. So many days had passed while, agonised, she had waited for the formalities to go through ; and never a word in response to her own cable that she was flying, flying, flying to the bedside of her little sister, Bambi. America was a hostile vacuum before her, and she despaired.

Jolted out of a dose by the last of a series of nightmares, in which she was falling alone through space and darkness, she opened her hot eyes and saw the foreign country for the first time. The plane had come jerking down from the altitudes and was now, through a thin drizzle, crossing a beach which, with the Atlantic creaming along it in the wrong direction, as she felt, bordered an expanse of flat farming lands with red barns and boxlike houses dotted over the fenced fields. Nothing here of the cosy thorn hedges of her own country ; and who in those alien houses down below cared a fig for a lonely spinster woman come across the ocean to look for a lost sister ?

The sense of utter, hopeless loneliness closed upon her when the machine came to rest at last and she saw her fellow-travellers greeted with warmth by their sweethearts, relatives and friends. Nobody here to hold out a hand to Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo, the untravelled woman from an attic flat in Garvel. She was now a piece of goods consigned to Baltimore through the American airways system ; she and a golden retriever, despatched from a breeder in Scotland to an impressive address in the State of Massachusetts. She wisely waited by the dog's cage for somebody to take notice of her, and surely enough an airport attendant came along and, in phrases that were to Ness nearly incomprehensible, but with great friendliness, conveyed her and the pretty dog to the airport buildings.

She completed the absurd form the American Constitution requires of the immigrant, had her arm intimately squeezed

by both the Customs man and the passport official as they guided her through the labyrinth of formality, and found herself in a cafeteria, eating strange and excellent food, served, so far as her tired and dazed mind could appreciate, mainly by machinery. The voices at the tables about her seemed to be of two distinct sorts : on the one hand, the hard, high, nasal and slangy ; on the other, the deep, caressing and formal. Their clothes were odd ; and Ness thought that most of the younger women could do with a good spanking. But their stockings, their shoes, their hats, their nails, their gloves ! She made mental notes of little things to tell Kit.

This hour of novelty and the tingling freshness of the North American air in early Fall distracted Ness for a space, but when she was in another plane, south-bound, the dull and damnable drumming of engines and airscrews brought back the feelings of isolation and of being unimportantly parcelled for delivery at a given destination. She thought emptily of the fate of bright Bambi in this brisk, noisy, competitive civilisation, knowing that it would either suit her blithe spirit monstrosously well with its glitter or break her with the hardness beneath the chromium plating. She had not herself realised the foreignness of the United States of America, and now, after only two hours of it, she saw that here was no sort of British colony under the spell of the suave English tradition. She was startled to see that a negro drove her taxi from the airport at Baltimore, and that he seemed sour and contemptuous.

As she entered the hospital building her spirits were low. The very splendour of the edifice, the brisk comings and goings of nurses and internes and students, all in aggressive white, gave her the impression of a vast, cold, efficient impersonality. A negro porter was kind but interminably stupid, boggling for minutes over the odd Scottish surname ; then a girl in an office was pretty, courteous in one of those creamy American voices, and yet detached. There was no sisterly breast here to cushion the head of a foreign woman looking for a lost child : nobody to pat her shoulders and say " There, dear ! We women always have the worst of it. Quietly, now, quietly ! " And Ness, sitting in a waiting-room so tidy and clean that it was in fact bleak, had to dig deep into her reserves of dignity and fortitude.

By the devious processes of inter-communication they found Dr. Chester Haythorne after she had waited for she knew not how long, her spirit numb. He was exactly what she expected to see, with a broad and sallow face, kind brown eyes behind hexagonal rimless spectacles. He wore a long white coat, and she knew at once that he had nothing good to tell her.

"Miss Nimmo, all the way from Scotland!" It sounded to her like "Scatland." He took her hand with a reassuring pressure. "Glad to meet you, Miss Nimmo, but I'm sorry to say the news is bad."

"She's dead?"

"She and the child died Tuesday night. It seemed the kid couldn't survive the mother."

"And the child, too?"

"Yes, the poor kid went within the same hour. Very quiet and tired, both of them. We took it the father would cable you. It's tough, Miss Nimmo. It's too bad that you've come all this way, too bad for me to have to give you this sad welcome to America."

"It's so bitter, Doctor, so very bitter!"

"Yes."

Ness knew that this kind man was watching her clinically, waiting for the signs of collapse. On her own part she was determined that no sign of surrender, emotional or physical, would appear on the surface of her agonised person.

"What was the cause of death?" she asked.

"We certified pneumonia in both cases. In confidence, I think there was a considerable degree of undernourishment. And . . ."

"And?"

"Miss Nimmo," said Dr. Haythorne, "you don't know this big country of ours. It's all very bright and slick, what the visitor sees of it, but there are neighbourhoods where life is a sight more primitive than almost anything you know in England. Down by the lower shores of the Chesapeake is one of them."

Ness took the implication. She rose, handsome and composed, and offered her hand.

"Thank you, Dr. Haythorne. I'm sorry to have troubled you so much. You have been very kind. Just one other thing."

Do you happen to know where my sister and the little girl are buried ? ”

“ That I just don’t know, Miss Nimmo. I’m sorry. I gather the husband came and took the bodies away for burial.”

“ Thank you, Doctor. Now I won’t take up any more of your time. You have been very good to a stranger. I am grateful.”

Her tired smile seemed to hold in it all the world’s sorrow as the doctor watched the passage towards the door of this tall and dignified girl from under whose feet it had been his business to remove much of their foundations in life.

“ Miss Nimmo,” he halted her progress towards the door. “ You’re in a strange place ; you’re in my own country. Can I ask if you have plans, friends here, introductions ? ”

“ To a bank, yes,” Ness said curtly. “ I think I’ll just go and find a hotel bedroom for the night. To-morrow I’ll look for my sister’s husband and discover where she is buried. After that—well, I suppose I’ll just go straight home again. There’s not much else, is there ? ”

“ Aw, Miss Nimmo ! ” The soft heart within the American shell was touched. “ Say, I’m just going to drive downtown. Let me give you a lift. I know where to get you fixed with a room.”

She saw the streets of the strange city with detached interest, appreciating vaguely that her mind was still alert while her emotions were numb from shock. So many automobiles, all driving at speed on the right-hand side of the road ; traffic policemen with loud whistles and violent manners at every intersection ; black and yellow faces among the white on the pavements—no, sidewalks. She heard Dr. Haythorne ask her kindly if she would care to spend the evening with his wife and family and was grateful that he did not press her when she declined. Perhaps he knew that she was fated to have a dreadful evening alone with herself and her emotions.

In the hotel he was deferred to. Sure, the lady from Scotland could have a quiet room on the fourteenth ; any friend of Doc Haythorne was very welcome. He seemed to hesitate to leave her alone. At length he said shyly :

“ Two things I’d like to tell you, ma’am, if you’ll allow me. Thank *you*, I’m sure. If you wish to go down-country

to-morrow, I'd like to think you had a reliable driver, not any taxi picked up on the street. Oh, it ain't any question of physical danger, but it's queer country down there. I'd like you to have a man who knows the roads and the people. I'll have a good man come round for you at ten to-morrow morning, say.

"That's swell, then. And now, Miss Nimmo, I'm gonna be your professional adviser for a moment. You're a healthy, level-headed woman, but you know you have taken a hard knock, and that it may come back at you. If it's too bad, the office down below will get me on the telephone, and the hospital's yours in a shake. But see——" He took a few white pellets from a wallet and dropped them into her palm. "It'll help a lot if you will take one of these right now and another when you lay down for the night."

The bedroom fascinated her, especially the separate bathroom. She thought lovingly how Kit would rejoice in its novelty: the little separate spigot for iced water and the colour scheme of pale pink porcelain and tiles extended even to the towels, the closet seat and the toilet paper. The Scot in her deplored this extravagance in mere utility; the woman rejoiced in the American exuberance in plumbing. The bedroom proper seemed drab in comparison, and when she returned to it after dutifully swallowing Dr. Haythorne's pill, the wave of loneliness broke over her with crashing force, and grief tore at her heart with merciless talons.

6

It was to have been almost certainly the last picnic of the year in the *Dulcibelle*, and Kit was jealous that Mhairi had to be asked. It was also a bore that they must lie off Banner's jetty till noon, just because Quin, or so he insisted, could not leave his beastly lawyer's office any earlier, even on the last cruising Saturday of the season. Ah, well! Quin and his chosen woman could canoodle to their hearts' content in the cockpit aft while she and Duggie had the fun of running the ship from the wheelhouse.

Mhairi had acquired a sea-going outfit, even for the little

that remained of sailing weather. Lord ! it was a good job Ness was away in the States or they'd both be in hysterics. The woman came to the picnic in slacks elaborately bell-bottomed over wedge-heeled sandals that enclosed a range of toenails enamelled a deep crimson. When she took off a waisted reefer in royal blue with brass buttons, it was to reveal her torso somewhat indecorously clad, as Kit felt, in a Wren's vest with navy-blue edging. She sported above her sharp face a saucy ordinary seaman's hat secured round the chin with a broad blue strap.

"And now," muttered Duggie as they saw her approach, "we're ready to bloody well sink the *Bismarck*."

Duggie was in one of his sombre, difficult moods. When Mhairi gaily called attention to the great hamper of food she had brought with her, he said that was fine, and good for you, Mhairi ; I'll take my whack with knobs on ; but he darkly invited the two women to remember that the tanks had just been refuelled, that he didn't wholly trust the gas range in the galley, and that there was to be no hanky-panky with open lights anywhere beneath deck-level.

Kit had Mhairi on her hands for nearly an hour before Quin appeared at the head of the jetty, waving. She jumped with relief to pull the dinghy up under the counter, and Mhairi said she would open her hamper and lay the swing-table in the cabin. Duggie remained aloof in the wheelhouse ; he grumbled over the condition of the steering gear. When Kit had brought Quin on board, his sports suit in greenish tweed seeming to smell still of musty deeds and sealing-wax and the heat of controversy, there was an arch little argument as to whether they would put out at once and eat on the journey or have lunch before they slipped moorings ; and Mhairi said she had brought so many nice things, she was sure they would all enjoy it in the calm of the bay.

"Come on, Kit !" she cried. "We'll make a lovely lunch for these big hungry men."

Kit followed her forward and into the narrow alleyway beyond the cabin and beside the engines : the galley on one side, the toilet on the other. Petrified, she saw Mhairi slip a cigarette into her mouth and flick the bar of an expensive lighter. In a moment of time she saw the extreme of folly in

behaviour: the thoughtlessness of a stupid, exhibitionist nonentity beyond the scope of order.

"You bloody fool!" Kit yelled, striking the lighter from Mhairi's hand.

In the next moment she knew it was the most foolish thing she could have done. A flame shot up from the floorboards, incandescent and explosive. Mhairi started to scream and to dance among the blue-yellow tongues of a slower, consuming heat.

Kit seized Mhairi by the shoulders and ran her out into the cockpit. Mhairi continued to shriek and, putting out all her strength, Kit bundled her over the side, even in that moment of terror enjoying briefly the thought of Mhairi's person splashing into the cold brine of the bay.

"Grab the painter! Hang on to the dinghy!" she yelled. "I'll be with you in a tick."

Kit was thinking of Duggie. In her inchoate understanding of what was happening, she believed Duggie must be imprisoned in the wheelhouse above the burning galley. She thought she might get back by the cabin and rush through the blaze to help Duggie. An explosion of searing white flame met her as she sought to pass through the engine compartment: a blast consuming and fatal.

Boats were already putting out from every jetty round the bay, from every vessel round about that happened to be manned, but longshoremen wondered that a motor cruiser should split so violently from internal explosion and so quickly burn to the water's edge, disappearing in a sizzle of fretted sea.

7

The driver of the Buick introduced himself as Ted Letichsky and, when Ness chose to sit beside him in the front instead of in the isolation of the massive saloon, proved to be a spirited and intelligent companion.

Ted was proud of the land his father and mother, Lithuanian peasants both, had adopted. It was without flaw in its institutions and its natural features. Ted was capable of a sincere defence of the grotesque advertising hoardings which,

bearing clamant legends, lined the turnpike on both sides for many miles out of the city and suggested to Ness that American business was wilfully intent on defacing the native scene.

"Makes business. Business makes money. See?" said Ted. "A country sure cain't live without money circulating. Bless the good old American greenback."

One way and another, with his chat and his innocent arguments and his proud explanations of those features of the scene that puzzled her, Ted was a good companion for Ness on this strange mission, taking her out of herself as she would have phrased it. The cloud was still upon her, the pain still gnawed within, but she knew that her grip upon herself was secure. Storms of tears and sobs in the lonely bedroom had relieved the first agonising pressure, and perhaps Dr. Haythorne's drug had helped to keep her in control of the furies within. She was aware, as she could not have imagined twelve hours before, of being still alive, with a remaining function in life, with an observing interest in the new world she was forced to traverse.

With an oddly easy grace Ted introduced her to the American institution of the Comfort Station, and Ness thought it a very sensible arrangement. He led her across the road at the first of these halts to a shack, of which the Greek-looking proprietor called her "sister," and she found the frank mode of address as pleasing as the exquisite strong tang of American coffee. They went on into Annapolis, its English buildings glowing in the rich American sunlight, and, pointing to the adorable front of the old Court House, Ted asked:

"Ain't got anything like that in England, eh?"

"But I come from Scotland," Ness protested mischievously.

"Say, isn't that swell?" drawled Ted in the native technique of expressing disbelief, and she knew that her companion, like so many of the English for that matter, set no store by the distinction.

"But these old buildings in Maryland *are* really English, aren't they?" Ness suggested.

"Say, ma'am, where did you get that idea?" Ted was scandalised. "Believe me, lady, Annapolis is one hundred per cent American. Why, if we had time, I'd run you down

to see the Naval Academy ! Guess you know what the U.S. Navy did in the Great War."

Ness agreed that she did and declared that she had greatly admired the American naval men she had met, and Ted, mollified, led her to an eating-house and insisted that she try a Western Sandwich, which turned out to be a remarkable affair of cooked egg with subtle trimmings between hot slices of bread, and made, with a cup of admirable coffee, an excellent meal. Ted insisted that the cost of the lunch was on him ; he reckoned that a lady who appreciated Annapolis and the splendour of Uncle Sam's Navy was a friend of his and a pleasure to know.

Beyond the mellow town Ness watched the character of the country change. It was now wider and wilder : farming country, spacious, with great expanses of brown heathland, recurrent swamps, low hills and pleasant woods, in which the bright autumn leaves of the deciduous trees gleamed amid the dull green of conifers. The frame farmhouses on the slopes were uniformly square, usually set amid acres of a dark crop Ted explained to be tobacco.

For all the alien interest of this countryside, however, Ness detected the depressing signs of near-poverty and a shiftlessness in curious contrast with the gleaming briskness of the city. Her eyes dwelt sadly on the broken-down fences, the erosions of sandy soil, the tottering barns and, even in this country of triumphant mechanics, teams of oxen drawing loads. In her preoccupation with death the ugly wooden churches of the hamlets through which they passed, with horrible painted windows and neglected graveyards, shocked and depressed her.

The mood of the countryside continued gradually to darken as they drove over a rise and down towards the low country by the shores of the Bay. Dwellings became fewer and meaner, mainly shacks with incredibly littered yards and black children in fantastic costumes crawling amid the shards of degradation. Ness was to remember all her lifetime the picture of a young coloured woman with a turban of dusty blue who smoked a corncob pipe between her huge, extruded lips. A chill spread over her spirit as the landscape became poorer, wilder, emptier, browner. Now she saw in its nakedness the dingy

realm Bambi had inherited in payment for a few hours of passion, for her belief in a man's boasts and promises.

The big car bucked over the hump of a bridge, and the turnpike immediately gave place to a sandy track.

"Guess we're near the joint now," said Ted, who had been silent for a long time. "Lady, right here they dredge the finest oysters in the world, but it's sure a bum section of God Almighty's creation. See them little creeks, nosin' up from the sea ; see the fog coming over the sun. Give me the bright lights along Boylton every time !"

He pulled up to shout a question at an ancient working feebly in a patch of garden, the conversation all but incomprehensible in Ness's ear. Muttering under his breath, Ted nursed the big car down the sandy road and, at a turn so sharp that he was twice forced into reverse, along a track of a strange near-white material.

"Shells," said Ted bitterly in answer to Ness's interested question.

He pulled up where a furrowed track of sand meandered off the line of shells. Ness saw from her right-hand window a small, battered building in red brick beyond a thin screen of apple trees and a muddy half-acre torn up by pigs.

"Guess this is the place," said Ted sourly as he cut out the engine.

He ran featly round the nose of the car and opened the door for his passenger.

"Say, lady, I'll be leanin' on the gate here, all the time."

"I don't think it's likely to be so bad as all that," Ness smiled.

"Ma'am, you've got what it takes," declared Ted with great sincerity, "but it's still what I said. I'll be leanin' on this gate, see, like what Dr. Haythorne said."

Ness found that she had in fact to brace herself to approach the house. She had the nervous fear of a child that a cur would pounce upon her with bared fangs. She could see that the dwelling was as degraded as any of the nigger shacks they had passed on the way. She knew at once why the spirit of Bambi must have declined in this sombre place among the rough brown fields by the sea. She wondered what stories of a splendid life back home Abe Coxon must have told the

infatuated girl, himself infatuated. In that cold moment of lucid apprehension Ness could understand why the American peasant, his promises shown to be lies, must himself come to regret the fleeting moments of passion in a foreign land in time of war.

He stepped from a shed by the side of the track as Ness approached the house and seemed to bar her way uneasily. It was hard to believe that this hang-dog lout in a tattered shirt was the smart American sailor who had wholly captured the easy fancy of Bambi. She hardly recognised him under a high-crowned hat, of which the flopping edges almost obscured a face engrained with dirt.

"You! Well, I'll be danged! In Chester County, Maryland!"

"The hospital people cabled me. You didn't."

Ness saw over the man's shoulder that an old lean woman had come to the door of the shack and was eyeing their group with suspicion and enmity.

"It sure was a pity about Bambi," said the man unhappily, as if he could feel the hard eyes of his mother boring into his back. "Seemed she couldn't come round to settling down in this neighbourhood. Kinda pined, the kid too."

"And it killed her," returned Ness harshly, "and the child. But I haven't come here to talk about that. I merely want to know where she is buried. Or have you written a letter since I left home?"

"Sure, I was comin' round to that, but you know what it is," this evasive man protested. "Anyways, Bambi had a mighty fine funeral to the Second Methodist graveyard up to Huxton Place. Anybody up that way will be glad to help you find it. Ask Ed Scrubb at the Store. I'd a notion I might be puttin' up a stone."

"I think you'd better leave me to arrange for that," said Ness softly, knowing now with certitude that the sanctions of the ordinary tolerant life had been denied the understanding of this poor white, farming indigently and primitively on the flats by the great bay, the contorted mind of his mother, an older victim of poverty, for ever devising reprisals on those who were by nature and fortune happier.

Ness did not even wish to see the rooms in which Bambi

had lived a while. She knew that she could not bear the sight of them, nor to encounter the witch who watched from the tumbledown doorway.

"Well, I'll go now," she said.

"It's just too bad," ventured Abe Coxon with obvious relief.

The churchyard was unkempt under the ugly wooden box of the meeting-house, with tangles of a briar she could not identify growing indifferently over graves and stones and the little American flags that strangely adorned some of the tombs. The grave of Bambi and her child, to which she was led by an aged and mumbling negro, was but a coffin-shaped plot of bulging, ill-fitted turves, a home-made wreath of wild flowers decaying upon it.

There was nothing here for the dead woman's sister. Here lay Bambi dead, her brightness all wasted ; and that was all. The expedition was fizzling out in blank misery. She did not regret having come without flowers, she could not pray, and as she walked to the car she wondered emptily what purpose it would serve to put up a stone to the memory of one whom nobody in this strange land had ever cared for or would trouble to remember. The creeping weed would quickly obliterate Bambi's grave.

She chose to sit in the back of the car on the long drive back to the city. Ted protested at the generosity of her tip, but she said :

"No, Ted. You have been very kind, and it was all interesting, even if it has been a sad day for me."

"I'll remember that, lady," said Ted. "I know it has been tough for you, mighty tough."

He looked as if he might for a moment consider admitting that the American way of life shared some of the faults of others, but Ness fidgeted to make another end. She and Ted would never meet again. For a moment in the hotel bedroom, packing hastily, she thought of ringing Dr. Haythorne, but the faint impulse passed. Her business in the State of Maryland was finished.

New York received her late that night, and she was frightened and bemused by its oriental glitter. As her taxi crossed Broadway she felt like one who looks into the mouth of a furnace, so bright and profuse the lights : as if a nation

chose to pour out its abounding wealth in competitive illumination. She was irked by the bustle and clamour in the foyer of her hotel, a broad acre of crowded floor as it seemed, with the atmosphere of a shopping centre. She must get to her room, away from these ebullient intrusions on the cold and empty territories of her mind.

The one of a platoon of brittle girls at the reception desk who checked her in pronounced her name with the accent on the second syllable.

"And a cable for you, Miss Nimm-o," she added, reaching to a rack behind her. "You're welcome."

Ness held the green envelope tight in her hand as she was shot in the lift to the 22nd floor. She was at the point of nerves when she must be alone with her confused and battered self.

The signature, "Pomphrey," first caught her eye, and then, half-blind, she read the message.

This was too much : so much too much as to be silly. No, no, no ! It could not possibly be true. It was too unreasonable. If it was true, no woman could bear so much. And how could it be anything but true ?

It seemed again that there was no escape. Ness thought in a black panic moment of the deep well outside the bedroom window. If there was so little left, why not the quick drop down the height of twenty-two storeys ; two of the Nimmo girls lost miserably in foreign parts, the other dead, burned, drowned in Scotland ?

The real core of her, the inborn fortitude of Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo, battled against the delusion of escape. That was silly, in her inadequate phrase ; it was imagining oneself to be more important than other people. Duggie was in hospital, said the cablegram. She had to keep on living ; she wanted to keep on living.

But it was a terrible thing to be a woman, with the capacity to go through the motions of being in charge and still with a heart that could break for love.

"Kit !" she cried before one of the bedroom's numerous mirrors, and staring at the face of a stranger. "Come back to me, Kit ! *Please*—my best, my hope, my darling."

But there was no answer, and there was nothing for it but tears.

8

Ness stood again by a sister's grave, this one high on the windy hill above the chimneys of Garvel as against that other one in the low ground by a foreign river. There were no serpentine creepers here but, on the contrary, the prim tidiness of municipal concern. The mound of turf was completely covered with wreaths.

Olly was with her, surprisingly the responsible party, the man in charge. On the way up the broad drive from the cemetery gates she had still probed for details : as if a life-time had intervened between this moment and the receipt of his cable in New York.

"But I still can't understand how it all happened," she fretted.

"We may never know all that," Olly fenced gently. "I am pretty sure Kit went back to help Duggie, not knowing he had broken through a side window of the wheelhouse to help Mhairi. If you don't mind me saying it, Miss Nimmo—very painful for us all—I think we should leave it there."

"But where was Quin?" she cried in despair, knowing at the same time that she must seem to be nagging.

"After all, Quin is not a good swimmer. I am sure it was all he could do to look after himself."

"It was about all he could ever do!"

"Really, Miss Nimmo, I must suggest, really—we should leave it all for a while. We are all confused, tired, heart-broken. I can most perfectly understand how you feel, but really . . ."

"And the funeral was only yesterday. Could it not have waited just a few hours for me?"

"I was called upon to make a decision," said Olly with dignity. "Please, Miss Nimmo."

Ness winced to think of the grim particularities of death by fire his stiff phrase implied, but her heart filled with gratitude towards this odd, courteous man whose "I" this and "I" that implied a strength of decision, a willingness for responsibility within the family, she had never suspected before. She had been so long used to making all the decisions herself.

He led her up a steep path in the cemetery to a sort of esplanade of memorial stones that seemed almost cheerful in its run down the eastward-sloping ridge from the very top of the hill.

"I took it upon myself," said Olly, "to buy a new lair. Naturally I had a jolly good look at the place down in the hollow where poor little Kit's father and mother are buried, but I must say it did look to me confoundedly overgrown and, if you don't mind me putting it that way, overcrowded. I must say I did rather think you'd like her being up here. Not so dashed gloomy, somehow."

Olly had been so kindly wise in his impulse, thought Ness as she stood by the grave. She knelt and laid her armful of chrysanthemums at the feet of her beloved. She was crying gently, but there was less bitterness, less coldness here than over there beyond the Atlantic wastes, for there had always been love about the child in life and death. It was little against the loss, the void of her not being in bright life any more or ever again, but it was something.

Ness rose and, considering the grave, mused aloud.

"I think we might put up a little stone. After all, Kit was quite a famous person in her way. I'm sure the school people would be interested. We must write the University, by the way."

"I should like to see a stone put up," said Olly behind her. "Kit was not just an ordinary person, if you know what I mean."

Ness turned to Olly, her eyes full but with a quizzing smile in them.

"My two poor little sisters," she said, much as if she herself was puzzled.

Olly took her by the elbow and turned her to face the walk downhill.

"I find it past speaking about, Miss Nimmo," she heard him say. "A chap wants to say so much, and then you see it's simply intruding on another person's feelings, if you follow me. I've often thought that letters of sympathy and wreaths and what-not are not much more than ways of flattering one-self. But when I think of what you have come through in only a week or so, I must say . . . really I must say, even if it sounds

only like excusing myself, I'd rather not try to talk about it."

They walked down the main carriageway, thickly edged with evergreens and the gravestones of the wholly unimportant dead : stones erected in the sentimental piety of emotional shock, neglected as time cast the endless web of oblivion over the anxious human soul.

"Thank you, Mr. Pomphrey," said Ness at length, adding :
"There are now so many things to think about."

"Naturally," said Olly, flicking his bowler hat, black on this occasion, to one of the jauntier angles. "And, by the way, I ordered a cab to meet us at the gates. Thought it might not be a bad idea, all things considered."

CHAPTER SIX

ACROSS THE WATER

I

OUT OF the National Club into the October night, his spirits low, marched Peter Oliphant Pomphrey. The gravelled drive to the gate was dark between shabby laurels, and the incessant rain of a grey day was running to the street in a freshet that gurgled like any mountain stream. Mr. Pomphrey inadvertently put a foot in this torrent and realised with disgust that his favourite pair of old tan boots, hand-made to measure by Peter Dickson, no less, were letting in.

He had passed what he described to himself as a damned dull, not to say irritating, night in the Club. Not one of the reasonably decent chaps about the place at all : only a lot of bounders he wouldn't be seen dead with at card- or billiard-table. Some unspeakable blighter had torn out and made away with the middle pages of the new issue of the *Sphere*, and Olly could not think what the place was coming to. If all that wasn't damned bad enough, what was a fellow to think of being buttonholed by that rotten little bounder Carabine, a confounded penny-a-line reporter on the *Courier*, trying to pump him—Peter Oliphant Pomphrey, gentleman—about the circumstances of poor little Kit's tragedy and then, with a smarmy leer, about the almost simultaneous death of Bambi in foreign parts.

"Funny sort of coincidence, eh?" the cad had remarked in his horrible accent.

"Look here, sir," Olly had braced himself to say with dignity, rising to his feet, "I am not accustomed to discussing the private affairs of my friends with strangers ; and if I were a younger man and we were outside the Club, I'd take a great deal of pleasure in giving you a jolly good punch on the jaw."

Despite his wet feet, Olly was warmly satisfied that he had put a cad in his place with so much firmness and precision.

His indignation was profound and sincere. No fellow with a shred of decency would seek to discuss with a stranger that which, as Olly perceived, agonised the soul of such a damned fine, splendid woman as his old friend, Miss Nimmo.

Wonderful woman : calm and plucky as the devil in the face of a shocking personal calamity. No silly buckets of tears ; could talk quite calmly about her sisters ; took what had come to her with the patience of an angel : a real angel. But Olly knew how deeply lacerated was the quiet soul of his old friend, for since she had died so horribly, so unnecessarily, Mr. Pomphrey had realised with a shock how greatly he himself—of all people, a confounded old bachelor !—had loved Kit. Bambi was quite another kettle of fish ; but young Kit : so eager, so kind of heart, so damned clever ! If his sense of loss was so desolating, God alone knew what it must be for his hostess, as fine a woman, and as great a lady, as ever stepped.

Battling against the wind up the steep, rain-swept street, Mr. Pomphrey thought darkly, and not for the first time, of Quin's part in that affair down in the bay. Never had any clear explanation of that ; perhaps would never get it unless Duggie chose to open his mouth when he came out of hospital. Wouldn't do to ask ; let sleeping dogs lie ; no opening up old sores. Dashed queer, not to say sinister, just the same. Olly could not see it as anything but damned awful that a fine kid like little Kit should have to die in horror while the only fellow who could save her was risking his bally life to fish that Sclanders female out of the water : even if she was as safe as houses really, with a jolly good grip on the stern of the dinghy. Something distinctly fishy about it all ; the rottenest sort of luck for poor Miss Nimmo.

The human mind working in its incalculable fashion, Mr. Pomphrey decided, as he reached the level of the Square, that he was at last finished with the Club, the National. His passage with Mr. Carabine had been the making of a decisive end. Sincerity of spirit wedded unlawfully with a trivial ambition and seemed to the dreamer utterly to justify his determination. He put it to himself that vulgarity was one thing he could not abide ; and yet, like a hopeful schoolboy, he crossed the road and, under the trees by the bowling green, lingered in the

darkness there to watch the swing-doors of the Club proper, a dim pink light behind them.

Within the course of ten minutes or so he saw various members depart in ones and twos and threes but, recognising each individual as unimportant in his purposes, did not stir from his place of concealment. It was twenty minutes to eleven when at length he identified Stevie Blythe emerging alone and, with a violent thrust to erect his umbrella, pushing westwards towards his home in King's Terrace.

Olly moved swiftly, hurrying in the darkness on the upper side of the broad street, to overtake and outpace his acquaintance. At a dark junction of suburban lanes nearly half a mile from the starting-point he judged himself to be fully a block ahead of his victim, and there Olly crossed to saunter back on the lower pavement like any gentleman taking an evening stroll, the inclemency of the October night quite forgotten in his innocent obsession.

"Hullo, Blythe!" he greeted his acquaintance with a nice assumption of casual surprise. "Filthy night, isn't it? Thought I'd take a gulp of fresh air just the same. Been at the Club, I suppose?"

"Oh, hallo! You, Pomphrey? Wasn't thinking, I'm afraid. That reminds me, Pomphrey. I'm most terribly sorry, but . . ."

Olly perceived that Stevie Blythe of the Hosiery was uneasy, a man now regretting a rash promise. He knew at once the nature of the fate that had been ordained for him by the Election Committee of the Club and he was appalled, conscious now of the humiliation he had imposed on himself by stalking this chappie up and down the West End streets.

"The fact is, old boy," Stevie Blythe blundered on, "the Club isn't what it used to be. All sorts of bounders in the place now, all this new money . . . the war and all that. Didn't they send you a notice?"

"They didn't, as a matter of fact," said Olly. "It's quite all right, Blythe. Fact is, I rather think I'll be moving across the river shortly. Nice place Miss Nimmo has taken over there, and the Royal Firth have a very jolly new clubhouse up at the ferry."

Olly flicked at the moustache with dignity, saying: "Don't

worry a bit, old boy, and many thanks for putting me up. I shouldn't dream of crashing in where I'm obviously not wanted ; and it doesn't matter now we're shifting camp to the other side, does it? Good night, Blythe, good night ! Jolly nice of you to have put my name up at all."

It was carried off with physical dignity, but Mr. Pomphrey felt stricken as he moved eastwards and upwards towards his lodging in a tenement attic through the remorseless rain.

Blackballed. The word meant to him what excommunication or criminal conviction might signify to a religious party. Blackballed. It was little enough that his old father, one of the founder-members of the Club, must be turning in his grave. But to be barred, as from a dear birthright, from his proper title to gentility in the town of Garvel ; to be thus humiliated by a pack of new-rich outsiders ! not a proper gentleman among the lot of them ! Blackballed. Dammit, it was like being spat upon by one of the louts now in control of things, and God help dear old Britain and the Empire !

Ness Nimmo awaited him in the kitchen of No. 20 Stornoway Street, a percolator of coffee bubbling on the gas-stove. He perceived that her spirits were low, and he felt guilty of having left her so much alone. Ah, well ! Now that he was finished with the Club for good and all he would take care to give the poor lady more of his company in the evenings, till Duggie came out of hospital at least. A chap must stick by his real friends in this sorry new world of bounders.

"Had rather a quiet evening, Miss Nimmo, I'm afraid," he began. "Sorry I'm so late."

"Not at all, Mr. Pomphrey," she returned to his surprise. "I was out for a bit, and then I had a visitor. It was Mr. Buchan from downstairs. His wife died yesterday, poor soul."

"Oh, I say ! Isn't that just too dashed bad ? Or perhaps, when you come to think of it," Olly's face lightened, "it might be what you could call a merciful release."

"I suppose it is," agreed Ness.

Her companion innocently wondered if she was merely listless or being mysterious. Never could tell with a woman. His hostess and this Buchan chap were pretty thick for a time. My gad ! It would be a nice how-d'ye-do if these two meant business. Olly pondered for a moment the awful prospect of

being what he described to himself as out on the flat of his back.

"The more important news for us," said Ness, rising to sugar the coffee cups, "is that we'll have Duggie home next week. Dr. Cullen took me to see him in the infirmary to-night, and all the splints and bandages came off this afternoon. It seems to have cheered him up a bit, poor lad."

"I did think the old boy was a bit chirpier when I saw him last Thursday," said Olly, delighted. "I say, isn't that ripping—old Duggie coming home next week! I'll bet you're happier now, Miss Nimmo."

"I suppose so," she replied, that listlessness returning. "Have a digestive biscuit, Mr. Pomphrey. There's some quite nice blue cheese I got out of Thomson this forenoon."

She sat down again and stirred her cup slowly.

"That's the end of it at least—or at last," she observed sombrely. "Now we'll get out of this beastly tenement. The place across the water will be ready in about ten days, and I'm going to move just as soon as I can. I'm only sorry, Mr. Pomphrey, terribly sorry, that you can't see your way to come with us."

Mr. Pomphrey was suddenly conscious of a quickening of the tempo of life about him, and he had never enjoyed having his mental processes unduly stimulated by challenge. His first pleasing thought, however, was that if his hostess was in such a bat to get into the house across the Firth, then there could be jolly little in his apprehension that she was thinking of getting spliced to the Buchan fellow. Crunching a last morsel of biscuit and cheese, sipping the excellent coffee, flicking at the bright moustache, Olly mobilised and ordered his forensic resources.

"It's a strange thing you should say that, Miss Nimmo," he announced gravely at length. "The fact of the matter is that I've been thinking a bit about things. It seems to me . . . what with the war and all that . . . we've got to take the round with the smooth; I mean, the old place isn't what it was, by any means, is it? To be perfectly frank, none of us is getting any younger; and I really do rather think, everything considered, that I'd rather stick by you and old Duggie after all. Only if it's quite convenient for you, of course. Don't

see why you should bother with a confounded old fogey like me, if it comes to that."

"Mr. Pomphrey! Oh, that's quite the best news I've had for a long time! I don't know if I can explain it without being foolish, but you'll never know how pleased I am!"

Her unwonted enthusiasm, the glow of pleasure that came upon her pale cheeks and the sudden sparkle in her eye astonished him. As he put it to himself later on, it seemed that he was as near as a toucher to being kissed. Never knew where you were with women.

"Don't mention it, Miss Nimmo," he meanwhile replied rather grandly, much pleased by his own forensic success. "It seems to me that these are times when old friends should jolly well stick together. You can't teach an old dog new tricks, can you? I must say this blue cheese is quite passably good. Don't mind if I have another go, do you, Miss Nimmo?"

2

Her fingers tenderly stroking, her eyes gloating on the contents of what she called her Treasure Chest, Mhairi was in a swoon of happiness. Her mother referred to it in the old-fashioned phrase as the Bottom Drawer, but Mhairi had learned from one of the shiny magazines she favoured that the New Bride made up a Treasure Chest, and though her mother might sniff and declare that what had been good enough for generations of women was good enough for her, the Treasure Chest it remained in the secret world of sentimental fantasy she largely inhabited.

The ill-schooled child of parents lately emerged from the peasantry of a hard country; impervious by born nature to the most obvious impacts of poetry or painting or music; insulated by her plainness and her prudery against even an approximate understanding of the dangers awaiting all those who embark on the occasionally sunlit and rather more frequently tenebrous seas of passion, this soft fool of a young woman was still, as she knelt to fondle the contents of the Treasure Chest, so many of the garments stitched by herself,

enjoying on a relative scale a profound æsthetic experience. The erotic suggestiveness of these trivial and unsubstantial articles coloured her emotion to be sure, but her delight in their sheer loveliness within her scale of understanding was sincere and intense. Tenderly she took up a nightdress in ninon and laid her cheek against its exquisite softness, and her eyes closed, precisely as might those of a wiser and superior person on hearing the slow movement of a great symphony open on a surging sweetness of deep strings.

Replacing the garment, Mhairi considered the Treasure Chest with a sharper eye, murmuring :

Something old, something new ;
Something borrowed, something blue.

The traditional requirements had been provided for long before, but it was awfully nice to go over it again. Mhairi only paused to wonder if it would really secure her safety against ill-luck, and the last line of the injunction be quite literally obeyed, to accept the blue garter promised by the Matron of Honour, Cathie Graham. She had the unhappy feeling that the rhymer had intended a distinction as between "borrowed" and "blue," but there were to be tiny bows of blue on the georgette knickers she would be wearing, and Mhairi decided that she was thus reasonably well protected against the hazards of marriage.

She rose to her feet then, remembering that Quin would be along within the next twenty minutes or so, and her face quickly lost the rosy intentness it had worn while she had been for a space parading the elegant avenues of her pretty little dream-world. It went empty and stupid as to outward appearance ; the girl's mouth drooped in spoiled petulance.

She closed the drawers of the Treasure Chest abruptly, snapped out her bedroom light and went downstairs to the drawing-room. The fire was burning brightly, but the incandescent street lamp outside was laying cold bars across the carpet through gusts of a late autumn wind with rain in it. Mhairi drew the curtains violently and switched on the standard lamp, shutting out the bleak world beyond the solid sandstone walls of Lindisfarne, enclosing in a few crisp actions

the warm pocket of territory in which alone she could feel secure.

She looked round the room uneasily and glanced at the jewelled wart of a watch on her wrist. Anon she raised a cushion on the chesterfield and took from beneath it her mother's copy of the *Golden Letter*. She was not supposed to know it was there ; mother and daughter shared through this blameless periodical a guilty secret. Mhairi had what she believed to be really good books laid out here and there about the room ; one of the pitiful little parts she played in the toy theatre of her mind was that of a great reader ; but she had started the *Golden Letter* serial entitled "Clarice Over There."

It was lovely : all about a typist, not pretty but nice-looking and smart in the tailor-made way and terribly efficient, who had promised to be true to an American sailor. It was awful waiting all these years for him, and Clarice, the typist, did so well in the business that she had a proposal from the boss's son, and she was also tempted by one of the boss's business friends from London, who drove a Rolls-Bentley and gave Clarice presents of Balkan Sobranje and gossamer undies ; but Clarice had made her promise to be true and pure, and kept it, till she was rewarded one day by a long cable from Bud to say that he was really Alvis G. Baddle, heir to the Baddle copper fortune, who could now offer her his heart, an estate on Long Island, a penthouse on 58th Street, New York City, a farmhouse and a yacht in the Cape Cod region, and a ranch in Montana.

For nearly a week Mhairi had been agog to learn how Clarice would act in these circumstances, for the catch in the story was that Clarice's widowed mother, who had sacrificed everything for her child, was dying of cancer—and Clarice didn't know ! It was a pity about Clarice's mother, but Mhairi had dearly hoped to learn through the last instalment that Alvis would be able to guarantee one of those wonderful American cures for Clarice's mother's cancer, that they would be whisked across the water together in a Constellation, and that a bonnie Scotch bride in a white dress decorated with seed pearls would shortly be advancing up the aisle of the Little Church Round the Corner. It was an awfully nice name that—the Little Church Round the Corner.

But Mhairi could not this evening lose herself in the lines of small, squiggly print on a soft paper. The destinies of Clarice had lost the bright colours of illusion she had brought to them only a day or two before. The walls of the toy theatre were cracking about her ; and Mhairi began to see herself at length as a person like the real Clarice, with troubles that were awkward and immediate and even terrible as they bore down upon you. A girl could not always, it drearily seemed, live for ever in the blue of beauty. Even such a well-meaning girl as Mhairi Sclanders must face a degree of discomfort in living. And Clarice was only a silly girl in a silly story, whereas Mhairi existed here and now within the walls of Lindisfarne, waiting for her fiancé to come and pay his regular visit.

At the sound of the door bell she thrust the *Golden Letter* under the cushions and hastened to open the outer door for Quin. His umbrella dripped, his raincoat was wet, and his kiss seemed distant, over and above the chill of the skin on his lips and nose. He was wearing goloshes, and these must be carefully removed and placed under the hallstand, while Mhairi must hurry to hang his dripping coat on the pulley and set up his umbrella on edge in the washhouse. The delay had the subtle effect of cushioning the impact of passion, of importing into their reunion a flavour of humdrum domesticity, and when Mhairi returned to the drawing-room it was to see Quin, so far from extending the eager arms of a lover, resting one elbow on the mantelpiece and staring downwards into the fire, so intently that he seemed to have to exert an effort of will to return to a sense of her presence.

"Quinnie, darling !" she surged upon him. "Are you not feeling well, sweetie ? Come to your wee Bunnyhug."

"I am perfectly well, thank you, dear," he replied with a dryness that daunted her. "But I have a great deal to worry about. In fact, Mhairi, I'm afraid I'll have to leave early. We have a case before the Sheriff to-morrow : a very tricky business, and it's important that we get the verdict."

"Aw, poor Quinnie !" Mhairi swiftly changed course, her right arm stealing round his faintly resistant neck. "Come to Bunnyhug, pet," she cooed, "come and gettums head stroked by wifie."

The solicitor suffered himself willingly enough to be drawn

down to the chesterfield, and there he was content to lie with his head on the girl's thin bosom, his hair smoothed, his forehead kissed, his ears filled, as by a droning of bees, with Mhairi's baby-talk. She on her part knew that, while this was one of those nights on which their twin souls somehow could not fuse as one, occasions by no means unique in her experience of her chosen man, there was more in their juxtaposition than that. He was nearly inert under her touch ; his almost complete abstraction could not be escaped ; and Mhairi knew herself to be engaged in a battle, of more significance to herself by far than that she now waged, at short range and by shock tactics, against his indifference.

He suddenly raised his torso from under her caressing fingers and drooping hair and asked, as if it had been on his mind all night :

"By the way, dear, when do you expect your mother home?"

"Almost any time now," replied Mhairi, as if she in her turn had her answer prepared.

"Good!" said Quin. "I'd like to hear what she thinks about this wedding business."

He had no notion, being so fated by natural endowment, that he was guilty of brutality towards a simpleton. He was indeed astonished to have his head petulantly pushed from its agreeable resting-place of Mhairi's breast, and then to see the abandoned droop of her head, and the salty spilling of surprisingly large tears into her lap, and to hear her bitter, boobyish sobbing. He jumped to his feet and retreated a pace from this embarrassing and regrettable spectacle. He did not know that he spoke in the manner of a pedagogue.

"What's happened, Mhairi? Really, dear! Surely you're making a fuss about something that matters nothing in the long run."

"You don't understand," wailed Mhairi. "Nobody understands."

"Now, that's silly, surely . . ."

But Mhairi was in the rights of the matter. Quin did not understand, nor did that rough, short-legged, realistic mother of hers, who was now bearing down upon them from a church meeting to do with a Mission in Zenana. The shards of a

romance, tawdry enough but private and thus sacred, lay about their heavy feet.

It was as Mhairi had feared these last few weeks : they were going to force her into a quiet wedding and thus, in dark and drab collusion, rob her of her triumph on the happiest day of a girl's life. Long and lovingly had she built up her vision of the glowing, virginal bride in white silk and loops of seed pearls and flowing veil, sailing down the aisle on Uncle Alec's arm, her train held up by two pages in red kilts and white silk blouses, the pretty bridesmaids floating like the petals of the cherry blossom behind her ; the bridegroom in morning coat and grey waistcoat and spats, waiting humbly at the steps for the gift that God was about to bestow upon him ; the Reverend Dr. Chalmers Chisholm of the Old Parish, a saintly figure in the tapestry, with his coloured hood and a signet ring on one of the white fingers, holding the Book ; and then, above all, the surge of the Wagnerian hymn of welcome to those about to pass through the Gates.

Poor Mhairi had even thought fondly of how she would turn back the hand-piece of her right glove with frail and nervous fingers to poise the pen nervously and inscribe her maiden name, for the very last time, on a faint-ruled page of the register. And now it was to be, these other two had determined, a hasty, make-do affair in this all-too-familiar drawing-room, according to the Scots custom, with a handful of dull relatives about her and herself in what should have been only the going-away costume. There would be an uneasy lunch in the back dining-room, catered by Macandrew's Hygienic Bakeries, no glittering reception in the ballroom of Blackwood's Hotel ; and Mhairi not unreasonably felt that to catch a train at the West in the early afternoon, with a lot of glum season-ticket-holders glancing at your new luggage on the rack and grinning sardonically, was a poor exchange in terms of romance for a late dinner in a distant hotel, a shaded orange light on the table, her whispered " Now we are alone at last, darling. Isn't it wonderful ? " and then the sweet invitation, the delicious approaches to surrender and fulfilment.

So she continued to sob until Quin went so far as to snap his fingers and say in his most impatient tone :

" Really, Mhairi . . . "

If he had gone on his knees beside her and made pretence to woo her, she would assuredly have melted like any misty-eyed girl making the Great Renunciation in a *Golden Letter* story, but that was far beyond Quin's deep sense of what was right and just ; and so they remained in humiliating deadlock until the door opened and Mhairi's mother stumped into the room.

"What's all this?" she asked, her face dark, practical-looking.

The appearance of this formidable authority had the effect of stilling Mhairi's sobs for a space, and Quin waved his hands feebly.

"It's this wedding business, I'm afraid," he tried to explain.

"Well, I've made up my mind about that," said Mrs. Sclanders squarely. "It would be tempting Providence in times like these to have a big church affair, not to mention Quin's family in mourning. You were quite right, Quin ; I'd rather give you a good cheque for yourselves to spend on your honeymoon or your house than throw it away on confetti and palms and red carpets and nonsense. I know these caterers. It's not," she added roughly, "as if you were a pair of spring chickens."

Mhairi howled at that and rushed from the room, past her betrothed and past her mother. The fairy princess was reduced to rags, the jewelled carriage reverted to pumpkin and she was abandoned. Quin had no wit for a situation such as this. He was alarmed, and his light eyelashes blinked behind the powerful lenses in his mute appeal to the hostess.

"Don't bother," she assured him solidly. "That's just her tantrums. Send her up a bunch of flowers in the morning, and you'll find her as right as rain to-morrow night. Now I'll make you a nice hot cup of tea."

Quin excused himself and went out of doors into a night now surprisingly bright with stars, the shallow puddles on the pavements all covered with thin, tinkling ice. He looked forward to another battle with the papers of the case in to-morrow's court and only primly regretted that Mhairi's unaccountable behaviour had perhaps slightly endangered his powers of concentration. On the other hand, he was pleased that Mrs.

Sclanders had proved herself a woman of sterling sense and a good mother, he felt sure, for a sensitive, imaginative girl like Mhairi.

In the sitting-room at No. 20 Stornoway Street meanwhile, Ness, Duggie and Mr. Pomphrey sat playing cards under the incandescent burners. The paying guest had in these last weeks been at pains to be companion to the young man just out of hospital, and Ness was innocently grateful to him for giving up so many nights from the Club.

"Nothing at all, Miss Nimmo, I assure you," he would say. "Delighted to help to keep the old boy's pecker up. Always been fond of Duggie."

"That is kind of you, Mr. Pomphrey," she replied, the thrill of a profound sincerity in her voice. "I am very grateful to you."

"Don't mention it, dear lady. A pleasure."

The new Duggie so badly needed gentle, tolerant handling : this changed Duggie who could be so morose and then so touchy, now almost wholly incalculable. Even at a harmless game of cards you had to be careful in handling this changeling with the hospital pallor still upon him ; and none except Mr. Pomphrey, Ness believed, could have completed the lonely trio they made with such true gentleness. She was often frightened to think what horror endured, what bitter reflections and regrets turned over and over again, must have worked on the sergeant of Commandos, but she was saved from morbidity, as always, by the senses of duty and fitness so deeply rooted in her that his restoration must be her first concern, filling her hours with thought and labour.

Now she watched him, with occasional whoops of glee in his old manner, intently playing with dummy a wild contract in Hearts doubled. He was still so handsome, especially in pyjamas and dressing-gown, for he was only out of bed on sufferance while it might be turned and tidied and aired. The hot-water bag was already between the sheets. Make him a hot drink. It was time he was getting upstairs. Would he want one of those tiny white pills ? Fancy a big, strong chap like Dug requiring sedatives. But there he was, getting too excited over the game, loudly challenging Olly to lay down his hand and pack up.

"Take it easily, old boy," Mr. Pomphrey was saying quietly.

Ness saw Duggie's face suddenly change from that of one warmly absorbed to a mask of bleak apprehension, and only then did she hear the opening of the outer door. It was all the more an agony for her in that her first volition was to wonder where Kit could have been out to so late ; and there was no Kit now, and there would never be a Kit again. Duggie rose, the cards scattering across the table.

"If that's our Quin," he said harshly, "I'm beating it to bed."

Ness half-rose to follow him impetuously, but Olly held up a warning hand. Quin came among them, his thin nose pink and twitching.

"I take it that that was Duggie going up to bed," he observed. "He seemed to be in a great hurry."

"I sent him to bed," returned Ness stoutly, rising, "and now I'm going to make him a hot drink."

"The old boy sat up rather too late, if you ask me," added Olly loyally.

"Another minute could hardly have made much difference, I should have thought. Just a moment please, Ness ; if the party must break up so suddenly . . ."

They gathered that Quintin had an announcement to make, so close to a given pattern did his technique invariably adhere. Ness stood with her hand on the door-knob, while Mr. Pomphrey elaborately started the rolling of a cigarette.

"We had a talk at Lindisfarne this evening about the wedding," Quin intimated, "and we all agreed that it should take place very soon and very quietly. That means, of course, Ness, that there won't be much point in me going across the water with you, even for a week or two."

"I see. Probably it's the best plan, all things considered. In fact, that will suit me very well."

Quin, blinking, looked for a moment as if a warmer response to his announcement might have been forthcoming, but he knew to an exact shade of perception how his position within this group, from which in fact he was now bent on escaping, had changed and been newly defined since one terrible moment of fear and fire in the bay.

"Well, I suppose I can have this room now," he suggested. "I'll be up to all hours with the papers on my case to-morrow."

"Certainly, Quin. I've got to go and get Duggie away."

"By all means, Quin," added Olly, rising and collecting the scattered cards. "And congratters on the wedding; I mean, jolly good luck and all that. I'll have a cup of something in the kitchen."

Ness carried a tray upstairs to the old attic sewing-room, now given over to the invalid. He lay on his back, his hands folded under the nape of his neck, the bare elbows out, the dark head and swarthy face floodlit by the bed-lamp.

"Here's your nightcap, Dug."

"Oh, good girl!" he said, seeming to start out of a reverie. "You worry a sight too much about people who aren't fit to lick your shoes."

"Nonsense! And you'll be interested to know that Quin is going to be married soon, very quietly."

"The sooner and the quieter, the better," said Duggie, elbowing himself up to stir the spoon in his evening brew.

"It means, of course, that he won't be going across the water with us," Ness demurred.

"I can take it," observed the invalid, gulping at the drink.

Ness walked to stand in the bay of the window. She was not happy, but she was not bitterly unhappy as she might have been three months ago. It seemed that unhappiness was her lot, and now she saw it all only as a continuing state of imperfection. The conflict between Quin and Dug was inescapable; it was now merely sharpened to the point of enmity by an accident. Just one of those things, as Duggie himself would say, tossing aside the complexity of the problem as so much debris from a pointless and mechanical process of existence. Even so, Ness saw the stars sharply bright above the northern hills, the larger and yellower lights of the town across the water beneath, and the drunkenly swaying red or tawny lanterns of the navigation marks in the Ship Channel and the Deeps between; and her old aspiration revived.

"It'll be only about a fortnight now," she remarked without turning to the man on the bed. "I think we all ought to be happier over there."

"We'll take a chance on it anyhow," said the voice behind her.

"It's perhaps just as well, I think, that Quin is making his own arrangements."

"Nothing like shedding the load," agreed Duggie. His response was automatic and did not yield an inch.

They were dividing, falling apart: Wee Captain Slocum's bairns going their various ways in tragedy or confusion or frustration or, in any case, misunderstanding. At the same time, thought Ness with a strange sense of relief, the problem was thinning out, simplifying. She turned to the bed and picked up the drained tumbler.

"Well, we'll see," she said.

"I suppose we will," said Duggie, turning over with a great heave of the coverings. "Good night, Ness! Don't worry."

The idiotic things men could say about the natural emotions of women! As if in their majesty of physique and superiority of intellect they understood all the small worming affairs that made life for the most fortunate of females a sort of jungle, in which they must live with all manner of frightening things; a wilderness full of allurements but also of ultimate desolations: not a single emergence from the tangled darkness more than half-satisfying.

3

Well, it was done now. The top flat, left, of No. 20 Stornoway Street was a nearly empty shell, ready for those successors who, under the new economic pressures, were almost clamorous on the doorstep, greedy to have living space under a roof, even if the latter was indifferently watertight and they must live largely in gaslight and between walls with the peeling paper and the blistered and cracking woodwork the Misses McJannet would not dream of refreshing.

Most of the old furniture of the Nimmo's had been given away or thrown out or, in small pieces, sold—and Ness had been shocked to realise how much money poor people would

give for just a few old sticks. (As Quin pointed out, however, it worked quite the other way when she came to buy some of the furniture in the house across the water and some odd bits at the sales.) All this day the removal men had laboured with their specialised skill to pack china in crates, dismantle beds, juggle with ornaments, napery and what-not until now, near midnight, Ness was left with a camp-bed and enough crockery out of which to nourish herself with bare decency. At seven in the morning the pantechnicon was to be at the door to take her goods and chattels across the water in the morning boat. The flat echoed and smelt of dust, straw, mice and yesterday's frying.

There were few regrets and no sentimentalities to trouble Ness as she stood looking round the attic room. She had enjoyed this day of clearing up, thinning out, burning, discarding and, finally, seeing into what a small and manageable pile the removal men could reduce what had seemed the teeming furnishings of a home. It was what her housewifely mind had been plotting for years: a thorough turn-up. She knew well that she could linger in the bow of that attic window and shed tears, thinking of little Kit as an orphan child and then a clever girl, of Bambi full of life and of a fiery, elegant loveliness, like a fine gladiolus in full bloom, of herself, if it came to that, the inhibited spinster, slaving day after day over the sewing-machine, ageing, fretting, loving. But now she would not surrender, the prospect of to-morrow was so bright. It was coming true what she had so long dreamed of, longed for and, latterly, planned. She was ready to cut her losses, and she was glad to, away from a place symbolised in her mind by the smell of cats to the long lawn and wide garden on which Mr. Lynas with his sallow face and dark jowls had so surprisingly opened the little door in the warm wall.

A bump from below recalled to her the fact, slightly astonishing, scandalous and comic all at once, that she was sharing the empty house with a man: her neighbour, Andrew Buchan. It was queer how things happened. She had been so careful to be alone with her last few bits of goods on the last night of all. Olly and Duggie were away across the water by the afternoon steamer to spend the night in the Imperial over

there—"and a dashed nice pub it used to be," Olly had vouchsafed. Quin, fleeing with comic alarm from turmoil and personal inconvenience, had gone to Blackwood's Hotel. That was all good. A woman wanted to be left quite alone to manage those nice, small details that were within her own province. Men just got in the way, though they thought themselves, at the same time, qualified to boss the people doing the real work.

Andrew Buchan had heard the noises upstairs through the open door of the attic flat and on the landing, and he had come to see what he could do about it. Ness exquisitely appreciated the irresistible helpfulness of the technician. Her father, Wee Captain Slocum, would have acted in the same way: hurried to help somebody else with a job on hand, confident that his skill could make a large, even unique, contribution to the swift completion of it. They were all bosses; certainly most Scotsmen were; they worshipped the job. As it turned out, Ness had discovered a length of linoleum that had been left behind tacked to the bathroom floor, something too precious to be neglected these days, and Andrew Buchan had been delighted to find a task to which he could earnestly address himself.

Ness went downstairs. Her neighbour stood in the hall in his shirt-sleeves, looking round for further worlds to conquer. He indicated the linoleum neatly rolled and corded and labelled on top of a packing-case.

"I'm quite sure that's everything now," said Ness. "Come and we'll have a cup of tea in the kitchen."

"That would be nice, but——"

"Oh, you don't find a woman leaving herself without the makings of a dish of tea!" retorted Ness gaily, leading the way into the bare chamber, bereft now of all its homely adornments of crockery and alarm-clock and shining pot-lids. "It's funny," she added as she filled the kettle at the sink and gestured towards the tiny collection of utensils on the drying-board. "Not even a kitchen table now. I'll pop these things into a grip to-morrow, and that'll be the last of the Nimmos in Stornoway Street."

"There's nobody will be sorrier to see you go than I," said Andrew Buchan.

He spoke with such solid vehemence that Ness, laying the kettle on the stove, did so with a jerk and a clang. She was suddenly, prudishly, foolishly aware of her state of unprotected female about to sleep alone in an empty house. She was aware of the strong forces of his male personality and of an intention bearing upon her. An old fear gripped her for a moment.

"Oh, we're not going so very far away!" she contrived to say lightly. "In fact, that's something I meant to tell you, sincerely. I hope you'll never hesitate to come across on a Saturday afternoon or a summer's evening and bring the children. No waiting for an invitation, no ceremony, please. And do you not think, Mr. Buchan, you should try to find a nice house in the West End and get the children out of this place? They are bound to remember, perhaps too much . . . like me."

"That's not the whole of it."

The man was still stolid and purposeful, as if he hesitated before an unhappy and unaccustomed duty and was yet determined to see it through while he was quite sure of the forces behind him.

"I don't quite understand," Ness faltered.

"Could you not call me Andrew for a start?" he plunged, flushing. "We're old friends and good friends, I hope."

"Yes, Andrew, of course I will. We're old friends and good friends and we have both seen a lot of trouble lately."

"Thank you, Ness. That makes it a bit easier."

Ness guessed then what he was about to say. She had known long enough that it might come, sooner or later, and she did not flutter like any young girl approaching the first kiss but rather, busying herself with the small brown teapot, seriously looked to her lines of defence, striving to keep her head clear, anxious to be able to speak fairly and plainly.

"This is not a thing to be rushed," Andrew Buchan resumed awkwardly. "It's something you'll want to think about. As you'll understand in a minute, it wouldn't be decent to make any sort of decision for a while to come."

She marvelled at his heavy deliberation, as of a Scots engineer supervising the laying of a battleship's keel. She saw indeed that the situation was ludicrous, but she had to respect at once his decent sincerity and her own dignity. Without a word she handed him a cup of tea and looked him straightly in the eyes. From that look he turned away shyly.

"It's just this way, Ness, if you can listen for a minute," he resumed humbly. "You and I have both come through bad times. You said that yourself. We're sensible, experienced people, both of us. I'm left, as you know, in a difficult way ; and you, if you don't mind me saying it, have had little enough left to care about. So it seemed to me to be decent to ask you to consider marrying me. It's sudden, mebbe, but that's what I wanted to say to you. I'll be obliged if you can think it over."

"You do me a great honour, Andrew," she said slowly.

She was utterly sincere in her use of the old phrase. It did seem the strangest sort of proposal a woman could receive, and she reflected a little bitterly that only a spinster woman nearing forty could have been the target of such an approach. She was still woman enough to think in one wild flash that it would have been happier for her, as woman, to be stormed by an outburst of this man's desire ; the problems were then all the more easily handled, more quickly disposed of. She was handicapped by the very decency of his approach.

"We could bring a good deal of honest friendship to it, Ness," he urged innocently, "and it could be a deep affection on my side, at least. But," he added hastily, "the last thing I want to do is to rush you. This wouldn't be the time to arrange anything or announce it. I'll be honoured, Ness, and I'll be happy if you'll turn this over in your mind and let me know. That's all."

Ness gathered the empty teacups.

"Yes, of course, Andrew," she said. "I would need to think of it, of course. So much . . ."

"Certainly, certainly ! That was my whole idea. Now I'll get on my jacket and get downstairs. Only, Ness," he paused at the kitchen door, "I hope you'll think of it kindly."

"I could not think of it unkindly, Andrew."

"That's good of you, Ness. I'm glad to leave it with you."

Now I'll be up early in the morning to see that these removal chaps get on with the job."

It was all very well while his strong, urgent presence was about you and you were sorry for the man whose lot had been so hard ; you were flattered that one man, and a good man, had looked your way ; but when you unfolded the camp-bed, like a cheap concertina, and settled down for an uncomfortable night in an empty house, you could not help thinking it was the silliest, humiliating sort of experience to have a man propose marriage on a basis of mutual convenience : to be one of two middle-aged failures debating the business of mating in the hollowness of a deserted flat. Thank God to be about to do something so decisive as cross the water !

4

The frost had been heavy on the long lawn, but it had melted in the sunlight of a pearly December noon, leaving on the grass a shimmer that the pale gleam of the morning transformed into a fabric of gossamer delicacy. The rough and hearty smell of rotting leaves arose from under the trees, and somebody near at hand was burning garden rubbish, the smoke curling slowly in the still air, the fumes sharp and challenging in the nostrils. The threads spun by spiders from twig to twig, from root to root, glistened as if secretly floodlit. On the strands of bacon rind Ness had tied to the branches of a weeping-willow by the edge of the drive the tits performed their giddy, greedy feats of acrobatics.

Just as she was coming, uneasily enough, into a secure sense of her new possessions, Ness was learning only now, in the thirty-ninth year of her age, how lovely a winter's day may be. She would turn like a child to see, entranced, how her footsteps across the lawn were as tracks in virgin snow : the dark clots where her gum-booted feet had fallen on the shining, bedewed grass, the faint trails of dragging strides between them : all as entrancing as a child's play with the nap of a velvet cushion. She could still wonder at the distance between Mr. Lynas's little wooden gate in the lower wall and the

Georgian doorway of the house beyond the broad drive. She could stop at any moment and marvel that in the dip below the path and underneath a bank of old bay trees there ran a stream, now tinkling thinly after a dry and cold November. It had seemed to her urban ears almost incredible that Mr. Pomphrey looked forward, when March came round again, to have a go at the small trout in the pool above the culvert and reckoned gravely that an odd sea trout might come up on the summer freshets.

There had been fearsome moments when the possession of so much territory affrighted her, when she could not believe in the fact of possession and would lose sleep, feeling sure the lawyers or somebody would write to say it was all a mistake, and would she start looking again for a tenement flat in Garvel, with some nine square yards of pipeclayed stone landing outside a stiffly-shut door, NIMMO on a strip of brass above the bell-pull, the stink of cats and damp coming up the long stairs.

At this moment on a morning of December, 1946, however, she was free from the old fears. The hour was full, her mind even more than content in that she was conscious of a quiet pleasure actively enjoyed. It pleased her to see the head of a mop being vigorously twirled over the sill of an upper window and to hear a girl singing: the little orphan girl, so absurdly named Thora, she had taken over from the Vigilance people to the burning envy of those few neighbour women she had come to know. (Mrs. Grigor, the chemist's wife, had sourly remarked she supposed you could get anything if you had the money.) Then, as she crossed the drive, she saw that the pram on the drying-green beside the house was rocking wildly and knew from the burbling and crooning from under the hood that the baby had wakened from his morning sleep. She hastened to bend over it and shortly she was laughing with the blond and roguish infant that kicked so lustily at his covers.

The baby had come among them almost insidiously and had established itself as an institution, in which even Duggie and Olly took a detached and occasionally facetious interest. He was of the first post-war crop that now filled the shopping streets of the little town with perambulators and eager, anxious

young mothers, very busy in the new ritual of keeping house and queueing and spending the points to the best advantage. The company of them all, young mothers and comic babies, had comforted Ness more greatly than she knew. She would talk of them at the table, and Duggie would say :

“ Now, which one is this, Ness ; the one with the squint or the curly one with the dash of nigger in it ? Lord, woman, you collect babies as if they were stamps or butterflies ! ”

Then one day, outside Rorison the fishmonger's, herself at the end of the queue, she saw that the lock of a pram had somehow slipped, and that a fair baby was heading into the thick of the noon traffic in Royal Street. People shouted, but Ness was first to move, dropping all her parcels and featly withdrawing the pram from under the nose of an arrogant Rolls-Bentley. Then a young woman was blessing her and picking up her scattered parcels, and Ness wondered what all the fuss was about.

They walked westwards together, and it turned out that young Mrs. Keir, who had been a Waaf, occupied with her husband and child two furnished attic rooms in one of the terrace houses behind The Airns, and that their landlady was an old b——, and that the fresh-complexioned little mother was not permitted even to put the pram out on the patch of garden ground to back or front. Whereupon Ness had naturally said that Mrs. Keir was welcome to wheel the baby into the long garden of The Airns whenever she pleased, and that it would, indeed, give herself and Thora much pleasure to look after him. It had come to the bit where she and Thora were in almost open hostility as to which should take Master Iain for his walk while his pretty young mother, now expecting her second, had her afternoon rest !

Now she bent over the pram, keeping the baby amused and at the same time thinking deeply and warmly of those things that formed the true content of life for a woman, but she was punctilious not to lift him up in her arms as her instinct so strongly tempted her. She stood by the infant till the outer gates opened with a creak and shut with a dull clatter and the young mother came along the drive at a half-run to thank Ness for her care, but, above all, to repossess the flower of that fulfilment for which she had waited so long during the years of

insanity. But Ness got holding the baby in his camel-hair bag while the mother urgently rearranged his sleeping-place, and Master Keir explored the sockets of Ness's eyes and the convolutions of her ears with exquisitely feeble fingers ; and when the moment came to lay him down again, Ness snatched a greedy kiss from his peach-soft cheek and cried with an intensity only just on the safe side of passionate confession :

“ Oh, I could steal you ! ”

By a little accident of movement she found her eyes meeting the mild blue gaze of the young woman fulfilled.

“ I know you would,” said young Mrs. Keir simply, “ but he's mine.”

The girl blushed then and dropped her eyes for a moment.

“ Oh, I shouldn't have said that, Miss Nimmo ! Ken keeps telling me I'm so careless about what I say. But it's a pity, isn't it ? ”

Now the young woman did not appear to realise that she had blundered a second time, but Ness felt kindly towards her in her innocence that sprang from happiness.

“ Don't worry, Mrs. Keir. Of course I'd love to steal the babe, and it is a pity. Some day . . . No,” she recovered herself briskly. “ Now, see and take a good rest this afternoon, and either Thora or I will be round about three to take Iain for his walk. And Mr. Pomphrey says there should be an egg or two to spare this week.”

“ I like Mr. Pomphrey,” said young Mrs. Keir, starting to wheel the pram towards the gate. “ He's such a perfect gentleman.”

Ness was left to stare down the length of the garden to where Olly was busy about the hen-run, and an extremely enigmatic sort of smile played round her lips. There were amusement and affection in that smile, but there was also something of a question, a doubt.

It had been one of the charming surprises of the arrival in The Airns that Mr. Pomphrey had revealed himself to be knowledgeable in the matter of gardens, an inheritance that had somehow never come to light on the top flat of a tenement house. The rather sad state of the new place had roused him first to comment, laced with memories of the glory of his father's garden in the early years of the century—“ when

gardens were really gardens, Miss Nimmo, believe me, and gardeners jolly well knew their place." Ness had then subtly enough encouraged him to action, only to be astonished one day by an odorous cart coming up the drive while she was watching the baby and by the gangling halflin in charge of it saying : " Here's yer dung, missus. Whaur'll I coup it ? " An elderly jobbing gardener called Mr. Petrie appeared on two days each week, a short and strong and apple-cheeked man who reminded Ness of her father. From what she could make out, Mr. Petrie's notions of how to guarantee a show of flowers and vegetables next year differed entirely from those of Mr. Pomphrey, and it was fun to listen to them wrangling. But the garden was being dug, the soil enriched, and the plans made with whatever degree of acrimony : and Olly assured her :

" Depend upon it, Miss Nimmo : we'll have some jolly fine flowers to show you next year and some whacking good vegetables. The old Petrie fellow doesn't know quite as much as he thinks, believe me. Never heard of spinach beet ! Could you credit it ? Swears that gladioli won't do in this climate. Rot ! Lobelia, alyssum, antirrhinum—jolly old red, white and blue—that's his idea ! But we'll have some dashed nice gladioli next year, just the same, and some jolly good spinach beet, or I'm a Dutchman. I know how to deal with jolly old Petrie."

Ness had perceived the pathos of this gentle revival. She saw, indeed she could feel in herself, how much recompense the ageing may get from a garden of their own tending : the assurance of continuing fructification. She could herself be as fussy as Olly about the spring cabbage seedlings they had bought and set out on the bank above the stream. She had even taken to reading gardening books with the hunger that impels industrialised folk to go back to the element from whence they spring eternally. But the hens were really a bit of a joke.

Perhaps it was herself, lamenting the meagreness of the rations, who had started the pantomime, but it was Olly who had taken up the notion with enthusiasm and pointed out that the bit of waste ground near the lower gate—Mr. Lynas's gate—could carry at least a dozen hens. Olly had gone on to hazard

the view that a dozen hens of good stock could keep such a small household as theirs in eggs throughout the year, what with pickling and so forth, and from that, in a leap of enthusiasm, he had dared to say that he wouldn't at all mind—not by a long chalk, in fact—having a stab at looking after them all off his own bat.

Thus Olly's hens had become one of the small if rather autumnal jokes Ness could share with Duggie, for the silly creatures came to fascinate Mr. Pomphrey. They were to Ness mostly an aggregation of jerky, greedy but decorous birds in the same suit of russet brown, and she was sure they would peck her at any opportunity. Olly, on the other hand, had names for each of them and was politely grieved when his hostess failed to distinguish between Daphne and Floss and did not appreciate the niceties of Clotilda's broody periods. It seemed that the bachelor had discovered a new world in the poultry run. There were moments when Ness and Duggie, watching from the front windows, chuckled to see how Olly could statically observe his charges for long minutes on end and even spy upon their private movements, dodging behind trees, as if one of the fowls might at any moment be about to produce a biological freak or to disprove some accepted principle of natural philosophy.

She moved across the drive and down the long lawn as Olly turned unwillingly from the wire-netting that enclosed his pets ; and she understood the intensity of his satisfaction in the escape from prison, just as the feel of the lawn under her feet signified freedom attained if not secured. They met by the tulip tree, and she saw with the amused irritation women bring to such matters that the knees of his grey flannel trousers were filthy above the gum-boots, and that he had somehow got fragments of hen-food mixed up with the ginger moustache, now greying.

“ I'm going shopping now,” she said ritually. “ Are you coming along the road ? ”

“ If you don't mind, Miss Nimmo, I think I'll stay at home and write some letters.”

As she moved downhill, the shopping basket over her arm and the daily list between her fingers, Ness morosely pondered the case of Mr. Pomphrey. That something had gone wrong

in the vague hinterland of his private life she was now tolerably certain. Until a fortnight ago it had been a part of the accepted ritual of the day that Olly should accompany his hostess down Lorne Street and along the Front so far as the doors of the Imperial lounge, where invariably he halted, swept off his hat and announced that he thought he might indulge in a glass of sherry before lunch, at which, he always assured Miss Nimmo, he looked forward to meeting her again. In the early evenings, when Duggie was about, it was once more Mr. Pomphrey's pleasure to sally forth with his friend, to the lounge of the Park Hotel this time, and enjoy what he described as a small snifter. It was alarming that his harmless habit had been so suddenly and obviously dropped, and then these feeble explanations about having letters to write or the papers to read !

For all she knew of men, Ness allowed to herself that Olly might have departed from ancient custom on a new-found principle or out of regard for his health, but she was shrewdly certain that, in either case, they would have heard about it at length over the table or the teacups. She tried sometimes to believe that he missed Duggie, who was away almost every day now, gloomily and almost furtively looking after the affairs of the C.C.C.—the new Duggie, possessed and secretive : another mystery. She could not, however, elude her own suspicion, now almost a bleak certainty ; and she was very sorry for Olly, a simple man deprived of the small ornamentations of living which gave him almost all the richness he could now know in this world, and a man too proud to take his share of that security he had, however fortuitously, created for others.

Ness became at this point aware of the geographical fact that she was actually passing the gleaming swing-doors of the Imperial, having thus gone by the greengrocer's and the fishmonger's in a spell. As she turned back, she was stricken by the sudden impact of the knowledge that she might even have to face the loss of Olly from her small circle ; and that was something hardly to be borne now. So much of pleasant custom and solid cordiality to be lost on a small point of pride ! Oh, to have the sanity and support of young Kit about her again ! But Kit was for ever silent under those lowering foot-

hills across the water. And lord ! said Ness to herself, shaking off sentimentality by a deliberate effort of will, any well-meaning and reasonably sensible woman had her work cut out to deal with the prides and prejudices of otherwise admirable and lovable men. It might be better to have been born a tart with a thick skin and a hard heart, or none at all.

In the afternoon she exercised her authority over Thora and herself took the baby for his walk. Ness nicely planned her route so that she could wheel the pram up the pier just as the late afternoon steamer was coming in from Rathmore. She made an arch pretence to herself that it was all to please the baby, and she had much to say to him of puff-a-trains and paddy-boats ; and the baby crowed and smilingly slobbered with a comic suggestion of the lewd in his expression, and Ness felt sure that he was beginning to speak under her tuition. As the steamer approached, however, her eyes searched the decks for the figure of Duggie, and the baby receded into unimportance until she had recognised her brother and seen him press forward to be first across the gangway.

"Thanks for the big reception, Ness," he said as he stepped on to the pier. "And how's tricks, Snotters?"

The baby's grin intimated that he was for the moment at peace with the world, and that he was indeed rather pleased with his condition. He kept a grip on Duggie's forefinger as they moved up the long spine of the pier, and Ness was relieved to gather from the trivial sign that her brother was in one of his easy moods, all too rare since the horrible thing had happened.

"I did really come down to meet you, Dug," she confessed. "Something I wanted to ask you outside the house. Tell me, does Mr. Pomphrey never go for a drink with you nowadays? I couldn't help noticing that he never seems to go out, as if . . ."

"Heavens, Ness!" Duggie laughed. "Do you want to regulate our drinking habits now? You should be in the Government."

"No, it's quite serious, Duggie, really. It's something else. . . . I just wanted to know if you had noticed."

"Shot if I know what you're getting at, but now you ask—well, I suppose old Olly hasn't been doing the rounds as usual."

That doesn't seem particularly odd to me. He's either gone on the wagon or he's hard up. What's the odds to you or me?"

They came then to the crossing of the Front, busy in the hour towards tea, and Ness was glad when Duggie took the pram from her and engineered it strongly through the streams of cars and buses.

"You see, Dug," she resumed breathlessly on the other side . . . "It's perhaps something I shouldn't say, but he hasn't paid his last month's bill. . . . Lord alive! I know it doesn't matter to me in the least. I wish he'd forget it sometimes altogether. But he has been so careful about it, all these years. It matters to him. Every first of the month, a money order for his board and lodgings; always in an envelope addressed to Miss A. G. Nimmo. Month after month for years. And this is the eleventh."

Duggie had no immediate comment to make. They turned off the Front and moved uphill, Duggie's strong right hand aiding her push on the bar of the pram. At length he spoke, and now he was distant.

"As for Olly, I suppose he's broke like a good many other people these days. Why worry?"

Ness kept pushing uphill, the physical effort absorbing her for the moment. They reached the level of the gates that protected the entry into The Airns.

"Look here a minute, Dug," she then said severely. "Olly has been our guest, our friend, for—what is it?—nearly twenty years now. If he is in a bad way, don't you think we might try to help him? Would you really like to think of this little household of ours without Mr. Pomphrey, especially since Kit . . . ?"

"Aw, what the hell! We're all in the same boat."

Duggie then broke through the gates and hurried away up the drive, leaving her to return the baby to his mother. Ness looked after his rapidly retreating figure, and desolately wondered what now had come to disturb her dependants and present her with a new set of problems to solve. It was odd that, all her life practically, she had had to be the fixed point, the cyclone's centre, round which the incredible male, the eternal babe no wiser than the baby she now wheeled round the block, revolved in his stormy prides.

5

The bareness of the room, even its cold and brilliant cleanliness, depressed her. It was an institutional room, with the desk cleared of everything save a white blotting-pad, an inkpot and a pen, with two wooden chairs on two sides of the desk and a bench along the back wall ; with nothing else, apparently, than a gas-fire and an expanse of linoleum highly polished.

A sense of unreality overcame Ness, to the extent that she felt it might really be that her mind had become slightly unbalanced. The curiosity which had brought her here, now apparently a whim, was hard to equate with her normal, her renowned, common sense. It was the strangest end to a day nominally devoted to the Christmas shopping, a few tentative flakes of snow falling through the city mirk outside.

"There is the schedule," said the lady on the other side of the desk. "As you see, the Act of 1939 and the Regulation of 1943 require a good deal of information. Adoption isn't quite the simple business some people imagine it to be."

"I didn't suppose it was," Ness murmured humbly.

"On the face of it," the lady resumed, "you are likely to be a satisfactory adopter from the Society's point of view. The fact that you are a single woman makes it a little difficult, however. On the whole, you see, we rather discourage adoption by single persons."

Ness studied this other woman who lectured her in such a remote, refined manner. Older than herself by some seven years or so, she concluded ; well bred ; nicely dressed in brown tweeds ; her face at once strong and wistful in a frame of reddish-fair hair turning grey ; two good rings on her fingers, the discarded gloves on the desk of the first quality. At a fair guess, a spinster lady who had found in this odd department of social work her meed of satisfaction. Ness felt deeply that she and this woman had much in common, but she could only envy the other's studied detachment.

"You have to understand, miss . . . ah . . . Nimmo, that we are rather on the side of the child. That is, our first con-

cern is to find the child a home where it will enjoy all, or nearly all, the advantages—or the opportunities, if you like—of a child born to good parents in a good home. And I'm afraid it's true that the child cannot get from the single person all that it can get from a couple of sound foster-parents. Indeed, we sometimes feel that it gets rather too much kindness and not enough balance in its upbringing."

"I quite appreciate that," said Ness quietly. "It's a problem I happen to know something about."

"Quite," and the thin lady-like lips seemed almost to snap. "But that is not just the whole story. The single adopter has to solve quite a difficult problem for herself—or himself. . . . Oh, yes! Quite a lot of bachelors and widowers want to adopt . . . I mean, what relationship towards the child you would assume. You act as its mother; you bring it up to call you 'Mummy,' and when the infant comes to an age of understanding it discovers that you are only Miss . . . ah . . . Nimmo and therefore shouldn't be its mother. We have had some difficult cases."

"I hadn't thought of that, I must say," Ness submitted.

"There are so many things to think of," said the lady. "The practical point now is that a single person can only adopt a child of his or her own sex. That is, you could take a girl baby but not a boy. As it happens, the biggest demand is for girl babies, and since we have a waiting list of excellent married adopters, all wanting girl babies—well, I'm afraid you might have to wait rather a long time. Not, of course, to mention the time required by us to make our inquiries, the period of probation, and then the legal formalities."

A carefree person might have been tempted to tell the lady to keep her babies, between whose innocent souls and that of a sorely tried woman she appeared so anxious to erect almost insurmountable barriers. It had been within the lot of Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo, however, to learn the lesson of humility and to know that the care of children can be the most passionately complicated of human exercises.

"Thank you very much," she said, rising from the hard chair. "I knew that it couldn't be a simple business. I'll

think of it very carefully. It's not quite a straightforward problem in my case . . ."

She knew a want to confide in this other woman, but she was shown expertly to the door, and the other woman did not even seem to notice her shy proffer of a handshake.

"Yes, think of it very carefully. It is a very difficult problem. Perhaps you would care to look at this copy of our Annual Report?"

Off the 5.25, to her slight astonishment, Ness was met by Mr. Pomphrey: Olly in his distinguished eccentricity an outstanding figure in the little crowd swirling under the dim station lights. He greeted her with the large wave of his hat and the courtly bow, and reached out for her shopping-bag.

"Thought I'd toddle down for the evening paper," he explained, "and give you a hand with your parcels. It's raining heavily, too, and dashed if I could remember whether you had taken your umbrella or not. Jolly lucky, eh, that the idea occurred to me? Look at it!"

Under the dome of Mr. Pomphrey's ancient but ample Drooko they moved down the station steps under the dull downpour which, succeeding the tentative snow, descended vertically through misty darkness.

"And how was the city to-day?" asked Olly politely as they hurried home.

"Oh, Christmas shopping everywhere!" cried Ness wearily, "and I wasn't in the mood for it, and it seemed the most dismal ramp imaginable."

"I agree. All jolly well when there are kids about, but not much of a show when there aren't."

"Our Christmas will be quiet, I'm afraid."

"I'm very much afraid it will. In fact, Miss Nimmo, I'm most extremely sorry to say that I won't be with you. I'd better explain everything at once, though I dare say you have made a pretty good guess."

"Oh, let's get home and near a fire! I want a glass of sherry or something. We might at least discuss this in comfort."

"A good idea," agreed Olly gravely. "I'd enjoy a good glass of sherry."

Then they were moving up the dark drive, but young

Thora had sensibly switched on the light above the doorway, and she stood awaiting them in her best black dress, her cap and apron, and her kindly peasant face beaming cordially.

"And there ye are at last!" she cried. "I was wonderin' if ye'd gone and gotten lost. Gimme the parcels, Mr. Pomphrey, and juist look at that umbrelly drippin' a' ower ma good floor. Would ye like a cup of tea, miss?"

Ah, the kindness of simplicity! The little sitting-room was warm and beautifully firelit. The small world of home was dear. She stood, stripping off her gloves and her coat, and was, with relief, removing her hat when Olly came in with glasses and a tall bottle on a salver.

"Didn't trouble to decant it," he explained earnestly. "Don't know if I have mentioned it before, but sherry actually loses its bouquet very quickly when out of the bottle. Dashed odd, but there it is. Your good health, Miss Nimmo! Now, let me explain this rotten business I mentioned."

Ness considered this figure of a man about to confess to her his worldly failure. Limited, prejudiced, unadventurous, undoubtedly lazy, not even so decorative as the lilies of the field, a dealer in catch-phrases, but still something, a person. He was kind and thoughtful and tolerant. Even now, in the moment of his humiliation, he did not whine and had the protection of his dignity in hand.

"The fact of the matter is, Miss Nimmo," he proceeded calmly, "I have had a run of rather bad luck and don't see it in the least likely to turn. You know what it is—rates of interest falling all round the shop and taxation away above your head. Well, to cut a long story short, my income is so dashed far reduced that I'm afraid I'll have to leave."

"No, no!" cried Ness impatiently.

"I needn't say," Olly proceeded smoothly with his piece, "that the little delay about this month's . . . er . . . doings will be put right, but there's just no doubt at all that I'll have to cut down a bit. Quite a blow, if I say so myself, eh?"

"It's utterly preposterous!"

The explosive force with which his hostess expressed this opinion startled Mr. Pomphrey, but under his raised eyebrows,

and with wonder, he saw his old friend, Miss Nimmo, in an aspect he had never witnessed before. She was at any time a dashed fine figure of a woman, as he had said many a time and would say again, but now he was held by the splendour that had come upon her with anger: the flush on her olive cheeks, the blaze in her dark eyes, the imperial tilt of her chin.

"Really, Mr. Pomphrey!" she scolded him. "After more than twenty years with us, one of the family, one of ourselves, a dear friend; and you think I could take notice. It's a horrible wound to my pride."

"The last thing I should wish to do in this world, dear lady," said Olly softly, "is to wound you in any way. I can only point out," he added more curtly, "that facts are facts."

"Really, Mr. Pomphrey! Facts! Will you please consider the fact that all this comfort we enjoy here—the fire, this glass of sherry, the hens, the garden, and poor little Thora—are all yours really. Don't you see the position you put me into . . . and just on a piffling point of pride!"

She said this with an edge of bitterness and even contempt in her tone, and saw immediately that she had only hardened that point of pride in this lonely man. The stained forefinger flicked at the moustache.

"I think we have gone through all this before," said Olly stiffly.

"I suppose we have," she sighed, turning from him to lean an elbow on the mantelpiece and poke at the coals with the toe of her steaming shoe. "In fact, Mr. Pomphrey, you and I are perhaps the last people to discuss this calmly. I wonder if you wouldn't have a talk with Duggie, even with Quin. I know they'd be horrified to think you should want to leave us."

"But, my dear Miss Nimmo, I don't *want* to leave you. You misunderstand me. I *must* leave you. That, I should think, is all too dashed obvious."

"Oh, dear!"

The man was tiresome. Ness continued to stare into the fire, now wondering unhappily if she was really protecting Olly or merely fighting to save her own pride, every whit as

single-minded as his and perhaps less gallant. She turned to him at length with a smile.

"Shall we leave it there just now, Mr. Pomphrey? I'd only like to suggest that you stay over Christmas and New Year as my guest. We'd really like to have your company, and it might give you time to make your new arrangements without worrying too much."

"Now that," said Olly, bowing slightly, "is a most charming idea. I am grateful, delighted, Miss Nimmo. Extremely good of you, I'm sure. And I rather think," he added, "we might very reasonably have another glass of sherry. Wouldn't do to split up the party, would it?"

The door opened on a double knock, and the broad and earnest face of Thora appeared round its edge.

"Here, miss!" she reported earnestly. "That's Maister Duggie comin' up the drive. Can I no' serve the soup now? Thae sausages from Curran's is burstin' a' ower the place."

It was comfortable to have the two men round the supper table, one critical corner of life at least half-turned. It was amusing to hear Olly and Duggie go off into one of those daft masculine discussions of the best way to approach Lamlash Bay with the wind blowing strong from the nor'-west. Then they agreed that, taking the sherry bottle with them, they would play a hand or two of bezique in the small front room she had set apart for her menfolk, and that would be them for the next two hours. Give Thora a hand with the dishes and let the child get out to the pictures. Let the girl have her dream, however foolish and impossible. And what was life without a dream or two?

The sitting-room was quiet, the fire burning low but strongly. Ness switched on the standard lamp and turned down the flap of her own little bureau in the corner. She heard one of Duggie's wilder shouts from the room across the narrow, stone-flagged hall.

She lit a cigarette, smoked it slowly, and wondered how what she was about to do would affect, in real profundity, another lonely human being. She wondered if she was not, in truth, snatching at an alibi. She could think of Andrew Buchan, his plight and his orphan children, with a great

warmth of affection. It was fantastic but true that by a stroke of the pen she could now abandon this experiment in a house across the water, let Peter Oliphant Pomphrey go his feckless ways, and become a strong man's wife with much to occupy her powers of planning and affection. Mrs. Andrew Buchan, wife of the highly-respected shipyard manager of Tod & Bannerman's, going to dinners in the city, entertaining in the big new house in the West End, secure . . .

She came in a moment to realise that she was torturing herself, torturing at long range a decent man ; but such a man in his prime, so lusty, that he would of his nature demand what she could not give.

It was odd now to realise that she was probably beyond love and, by reason of so many sacrifices and compromises within her private experience, incapable of surrender. She had had to throw up so many earthworks against the impacts of existence.

So there it was, apparently ; and she sat down at the bureau, and in her clear and rather lovely script, on her fine new faintly blue notepaper with the address embossed in genteel blue capitals, started her letter :

DEAR ANDREW,

I have taken a long time to think over your kind proposal, and I hope you will believe that its importance has never been far from my mind since you made it. You paid me a great compliment which, believe me, I shall never forget, but I must at once tell you that, after a great deal of anxious thought, I can only say in honesty to both of us that . . .

Ness laid aside her pen. It was all so stiff. Was she sincere ? It was so difficult to put delicate things the right way. Another burst of triumphant laughter from Duggie bellowed across the passage. Ness took up her pen again and formally refused Andrew Buchan's offer of marriage. When she returned from the pillar-box down by the church Duggie was out in the hall, demanding to know if there wasn't any beer in the ruddy house.

6

It was a long battle to persuade Duggie that he must attend Quin's wedding. The violence of his objections was alarming, the contemptuousness of his views on the affianced couple distressing. There were moments when Ness despaired of Duggie as a brutal fool, a violent oaf (as, by an exquisite irony, Quin undoubtedly regarded him), but when her anger had lost its heat she would be oppressed by the far more onerous thought, almost a certainty in her mind, that in the affair of the *Dulcibelle* there had been more elements of tragedy and failure than she had been, or ever would be, allowed to hear.

This new darkness in Duggie, as she phrased it to herself, affrighted her. She knew enough of living to understand the effects of physical shock, but it seemed to her anxious mind that the dear lad's spiritual balance had been disturbed in a degree beyond her understanding. She hated to use the phrase even in the privacy of her own mind, but there was a screw loose somewhere in that complex mechanism. The glum moods and the grudging reticence ; then a phase of what-the-hell and noise ; then a sudden access of tenderness and solicitude ; then an acidulous burst of gunfire against Quin and Mhairi ; and in between times an uneasy hiatus of laziness, languor and brooding, mysterious tolerance of a world of foolish ants.

"I can make nothing of him," Ness burst out in confession to Mr. Pomphrey one evening. "He just says he won't go. He doesn't seem to see that he is insulting me—and you, for that matter."

"I think you'd better let me have a talk with him. Poor old Duggie wants some rather careful handling just now and, if you don't mind me saying it, Miss Nimmo, one chappie can talk to another chappie, over a drink or something like that, much more to the point than a woman ever could."

"I'll be grateful if you would, Mr. Pomphrey," cried Ness desperately, "but please, oh please ! don't take it up with him when I am there."

Olly raised his eyebrows and gave his moustache a flick. "I don't quite follow, I must say."

"Mr. Pomphrey, when a woman has lived for a long time with men, bringing up two brothers as I did, she comes to know that keeping the peace is the most wearing and thankless job of all. You have to listen to their grievances against each other, to threats and bitterness and ill temper. They say to her what they wouldn't say to each other; it's she who gets the battering, endlessly. She just has to be a shock-absorber. I had more than twenty years of it, and now that we have some peace and comfort about us I don't want any more."

"Very well put," Olly gravely agreed. "Hadn't quite seen it that way before, I must confess. Old Quin was a bit of a handful in that direction, come to think of it. Anyhow, I'll have a stab at coaxing old Duggie into some sense."

It would have done Ness's heart good to hear how the paying guest, the frail and fastidious derelict on the ever-rolling seas of industrial society, pitted his own private brand of courage against the formidable tempers of the ex-Commando.

They stood at the quiet end of Sadie's bar in the Imperial when Olly opened with an apparently casual reference to the approach of Quin's wedding day, and Duggie said he did not give one hoot in hell for Quin's wedding and wouldn't be seen dead at it. Olly cleverly ignored the decisive profanity and went on to express disarmingly his great regret that Duggie took that view. He felt that families should stick together on formal occasions, pointing out the unnecessary and unpleasant social consequences of a break that would be obvious to everybody. Duggie said that "break" was about the right word, the noisier and more damaging the better, but Olly went on, appearing now to plead with his companion. Duggie fell silent, dangerously so. At length he banged his glass on the counter and, swinging Olly round by the shoulder to glare into those mild eyes, snarled:

"So it's a put-up job, eh? Hired by the family to talk the bad boy round? And what the ruddy hell has it got to do with you?"

"What has it got to do with me?" repeated Olly mildly, raising his eyebrows. "It has got this to do with me, Duggie."

I happen to have watched for a good many years now what your sister has done for you and the others, and I am pretty sick to think that you won't put up with a mere couple of hours of boredom to give her a little happiness in this business. I am sorry—and I'm not going to mince my words, Duggie—to see you, of all people, behaving like a cad."

He had uttered the most insulting word in his vocabulary. Now he was prepared to receive a blow in the strictest physical sense, one of Duggie's sudden expressions of the internal tumult he could not understand and therefore could not control. The physical blow did indeed fall upon his person, and Olly was sent bumping into the bar by the crash of Duggie's heavy hand between his shoulder-blades, but now Duggie was grinning with a delight at once warm and malicious, and crying :

"Good old Olly ! You win : trick, hand, rubber and the kitty. All right, all right ! I'll go to the ruddy wedding, but I won't promise not to get tight if there's any booze about. Now, brother, a cigar or a coconut ? "

Sadie glanced down the bar at one of her bad boys and said :

"That's enough from you, Duggie. This isn't D-day."

"No, it's pay-day," roared the wild young man. "Sadie, beautiful, two large whiskies before my old pal here and I roll up the road, singing and being sick."

"No, no, Dug ! " Olly protested.

"Shurrup, Olly ! This is the pay-off, if you only knew it."

"Don't know what you mean."

"You'll know soon enough. Thanks, Sadie. Hair on your chest, Olly."

"Chin-chin, old boy ! Dashed nice drop of whisky, this. I've been saying ever since the war began that the good old proprietaries are a better tippie than the bulk stuff at twice the price."

Olly popped his head round the sitting-room door to indicate to Ness, by a cunning smile and a raised thumb, that his mission had been successful.

"He'll go ? " she whispered ecstatically. "Oh, good ! How did you manage it, Mr. Pomphrey ? "

"No trouble at all," said Olly with quiet pride. "Got to

know how to take chappies like old Dug the right way, that's all."

So they went across in the morning boat one foggy day to witness the quiet wedding of Quin and Mhairi in the drawing-room of Lindisfarne, the affair conducted by a bullock-strong, young, red-haired minister of the Church of Scotland. It was felt by all to be a slightly awkward circumstance that the groomsman was one of the bridegroom's business friends, Mr. Matt Crockart, C.A., but this was warmly rationalised as an inevitable consequence of the tragic accident in which the younger Mr. Nimmo had been so seriously injured. It was even whispered that the poor boy, so handsome in the dark way, was not quite right in the head yet : or so the whisperer had been told.

The Nimmo contingent of three might have been lost in the gathering of a dozen guests on the Sclanders side, including some very odd and elderly maiden aunts and a rubicund uncle given to puns ; but Ness had dressed her imperial person with care and in black cunningly contrasted with sheer white—and the damndest fine woman in the place by a very long chalk, Olly privately concluded—and what with Olly's own individual style of attire and his polished manners, and Duggie's dark and baffling charm, the Nimmos in fact formed a minority group the other side could not but respect. Only the punning uncle took away from the party a poor impression of those three strange people who received his best quips with polite smiles but without the laughter he usually earned.

"Snobs," he said to his wife as they drove away from Lindisfarne in the late afternoon of the feast.

"Ach, it takes all sorts to make a world," returned his experienced wife while she fumbled about her heavy lower limbs to loosen her shoes. "There, that's better. Losh, I thought ma feet was goin' to burst ! You could afford to remember, John Sclanders," she sensibly added, "that that Miss Nimmo and her brother have had a lot of trouble to bear. My, but I could be doing with her figure !"

In the meantime there had been served in the dining-room a luncheon of such opulence and even elegance that every woman present knew that the catering had been entrusted to an expensive firm in the city. While the speeches were going

on—dear Olly, delightfully elegant in proposing the health of “The Bride’s Mother”—Ness considered the unfriendly visage and the heavy body of her hostess, and made allowances for the poor old woman’s inability to dress herself with discretion, and yet concluded that here was a person who knew well what she was about and could use money copiously on the right occasion. Another realist, but now through the difficult passages of living . . . Olly said of the meal afterwards that it was “Fit for a king. Everything just right. Wines coming on at exactly the right time. I thought the lamb chops were most particularly delightful.”

Olly had been greatly prejudiced in Mrs. Sclanders’ favour still earlier when, a sparkling moselle of dubious provenance circulating immediately after the ceremony, she had thrust her dark and forbidding face between him and the red-haired minister in conversation and gruffly announced :

“I know you gentlemen would like some of the hard stuff better. You’ll find a decanter of whisky on the sideboard.”

“Dashed civilised of the old lady, I thought,” said Olly, canvassing the events of the day later on. “You’ll go a jolly long way to meet a woman who would think of a little thing like that. I expect,” he added thoughtfully, “her husband liked a nobbler now and again.”

Ness could be little more than a watcher at the feast : the mere sister of the junior celebrant on this day of days in a young woman’s life, burdened by memories and implications, incapable of surrender to jocosity, sustained only—and that not a little—by her cool awareness of the fact that, among all the women present, she stood at least a little apart for looks and dress. She considered Mhairi in her hour and quietly thought that the only Sclanders girl and Quin were making a match wholly suitable to their capacities, seeing with the witch-like perception of the bereft that Mhairi would probably come to match Quin’s nippiness with a shrewishness of her own, and she hoped that they would reach their compromise. This couple was never destined for either heavenly delight or high tragedy.

While she gossiped politely with Mhairi’s maiden aunts, Ness knew in her inner mind that this was the end of her dealings with Quin, and that only Duggie was left to her to

handle in the way of responsibility. While she talked and ate and clinked glasses with dimly perceived and fleeting personalities at the feast, her eyes and her thoughts were directed towards her younger brother. She saw him quiet, polite, tolerantly smiling, but aloof : always as far to the back of the throng as he could contrive. It was a relief, but it was a puzzle, that all the blandishments of the infatuated Olly, all the jerky heartiness of the red-haired young minister, could not persuade him to more than a toying with a glass of sherry and a ritual acceptance of a goblet of red wine at lunch. On the evening boat going home she puzzled as between this reticence and the exuberant appreciation with which Olly, still sticking to the butt of one of the caterer's excellent cigars, referred to a slap-up affair, jolly well managed and, if you asked him, a dashed pleasant day, and civilised from the first go.

Ness thought that Duggie's quietness sprang, perhaps, from a trivial hostility towards the Sclanders family ; and that made her angry. Then she thought fearfully of fire and explosion in the bay, and she tried to assume that Quin and his works had taken on the character of hostile symbols in the mind of a sick man.

As the little steamer approached the pier on the other side of the water in gathering darkness, however, she knew only that the case of Duggie was not to be so easily rationalised. She had the feeling of the dark stream of life flowing round her legs, threatening to carry her off her feet, while on the apparently smooth surface of the water there danced the comic figures of Mrs. Sclanders, Mhairi with her long nose, the punning relative, Mr. Pomphrey making a speech, the red-haired minister wanting a drink, and all the other ludicrous decorations of existence that glittered between her and a just comprehension of its meaning. She wished in particular that Olly would shut up talking about the cutlets and the cheese straws and the remarkable wisdom of Mrs. Sclanders in perceiving that he and the parson, a very decent chap, would want something with a trifle more teeth in it than a sparkling moselle of no class at all.

When they got home she stood awhile in the dim-lit sitting-room to let little Thora once again admire her dress,

to smile at the wide, admiring eyes of the child, and to be pleased indeed by her candid "Aw, miss, ye're a right smasher! I'll bet you was the belle of the party." Thora, dismissed to make a cup of tea, Ness took off her hat with relief and was wearily stretching her arms out of her coat-sleeves when Duggie joined her, the darkness of his mood as palpable as the odour of toasting bread seeping through the back passages from the kitchen.

"Well, that's that, I suppose," said Ness idly enough.

"It is, thank God!" replied her brother roughly.

He seemed to be looking for a book on the shelves of what had once been a cupboard, but Ness was not deceived by the trick. She had only to listen to the running of Olly's bath-water upstairs to know that Duggie had at length come to her with whatever was on his mind.

"What is it you want to say to me, Dug?" she asked.

He shut with a slam the book he had picked from the shelves and thrust it back in its place. Then he turned towards her, leaning slightly over the back of a small arm-chair, his eyes half-closing in quizzical interest.

"You're a clever wench, Ness," he said.

"Oh, no! I've merely watched you growing up for twenty years. What is it, Dug?"

"You've guessed, of course. I'm beating it out of here just as soon as I can get a passage somewhere."

"Exactly why?"

"Hell, do you think I could bear the sight of a motor boat any longer?"

"No, I suppose not. But there are other things to do."

"Such as? Anyhow, the jolly old C.C.C. is sold . . . down the river, if you like. Those hotel people bought it and paid a good price. I'm paying back your loan with interest, and I'll still be left with five hundred plus. That'll take me somewhere out of here, surely."

"I see," she hesitated to gain time for clear thinking. She knew that the case was beyond argument. "Have you any idea where you might go?"

"Does it matter? Out to Africa to grub for monkey nuts; that seems to be the racket nowadays. Australia, Canada . . . What does it matter?"

"Oh, it matters, Dug! To me, at least."

"I'm sorry, Ness. I'm grateful. But . . . there are too many ghosts round about here."

Thora blundered in with the tea, dropped the tray with a clatter on the low table by the fire and, seeing that her bright presence was somehow not desired, went out quickly, closing the door with the care Ness had taught her. She concluded simply that Maister Duggie and the Mistress were having a bit of a rammy; and Thora's experience of life had taught her that crises of the kind were apt to arise from time to time and were thus of little importance.

Ness raised the cosy from over the little brown teapot, lifted the lid and stirred the brew.

"This makes it all a little bit difficult for me, of course," she said.

"It's getting a bit too difficult for us all," returned Duggie cryptically.

You could not know what the experience of violent warfare had done to young men. You did not know what had happened in those few minutes of terror when the *Dulcibelle* went up in flames. You could not probe the darkness that had fallen round another soul in its own isolation. You simply must not see yourself as the unique heroine of a romance.

"Will you have a cup of tea, Dug?" she asked.

"A cup of tea! Another spot of soothing syrup. . . . No, thanks!"

He went from the room and left Ness to contemplate what he had left about her feet of the ruins of a plan of living. He was bound to be the one to make it most difficult for her, but her heart must always be with Duggie, the last left to her of the group she had once commanded: the strongest and the most charming and the most perplexing.

Olly bustled in, radiating that sense of conscious virtue which overcomes almost all males who have recently immersed their naked bodies in warm water.

"Feel absolutely a new man, Miss Nimmo!" he announced.

"Nothing like a good hot bath after a busy day, that's what I always say. It *was* a jolly good day, wasn't it? I really must hand it to the old lady . . . What's her name now? Mrs. Sclanders, yes. . . . Put up an absolutely first-class show."

"It was lovely," said Ness. "A cup of tea, Mr. Pomphrey? Just help yourself, would you? I must go and change. I'm . . . I'm rather tired."

"Bet you are," agreed Olly pleasantly. "I'll just help myself. Don't worry about me at all, Miss Nimmo, please!"

7

Wind and rain came upon the west that Christmas Day, and as they sat in the little front room of The Airns, their modest feasting over, Ness and Olly could feel the gusts shake the old house.

A tiny tree, which she had decorated to please young Thora and a little in sentimental memory of Kit, glowed with tiny electric bulbs on the table at the window, but there was neither holly nor mistletoe about. Only two or three cards decorated the mantelpiece, and none had gone out from this lonely household. They had exchanged among themselves no more than token gifts. (Only Thora took the brunt of generosity and was now the dazed owner of the best outfit of good, sensible underclothing she had ever possessed or dreamed of possessing, and enchanted by the promise that she and her girl-friend would have a whole day in the city and booked seats for the Alhambra pantomime. No other lassie had a mistress like her mistress.) The dinner at six had consisted of a good brown soup, a fowl, the inevitable pudding and cheese straws.

They had been quiet over it, and even Olly, with all his instinct for occasions, had merely raised his first glass of port and murmured:

"One small toast, I think. Your continuing good health, Miss Nimmo, and jolly good luck to us all!"

Now Duggie had gone for a walk, looking in the storm, thought Ness, for the secret of the storm within his own soul. Thora had been allowed to have her girl-friend in the kitchen for the evening, and they were now telling fortunes with cards. Olly reclined in a big chair, his eyes closed, his third glass of port on an occasional table beside him, and seemed to be asleep except when the ash of his cigar required expert hand-

ling. As for Ness, she darned a pair of Duggie's socks and felt about her an emptiness, a frustrated nothingness. She was thinking that their observation of the feast had been at once a mockery and a decisive turn along the road of life, and she was afraid of what lay ahead, almost as acutely as a soldier might apprehend the touching-off of a mine by his next footstep.

A heavy gust struck the house; the windows rattled and the shards of a slate from the roof tinkled on the gravelled drive outside. Olly's eyes blinked wide open.

"Stormy night," he observed. "Makes you glad to be sitting by a warm fireside."

"Yes, indeed," Ness agreed.

Olly hitched himself up in his chair as if he had suddenly become conscious of a breach of manners in seeming to snooze.

"It's been a jolly nice day, just the same," he suggested. "Quiet, if you like, but what could you expect? I must say our little dinner was very pleasant. Really, Miss Nimmo, I must say that you—and that nice kid, Thora, of course—do us most extremely well."

"Thank you, Mr. Pomphrey."

"I did think," Olly resumed a congenial theme, "that old Duggie seemed a bit under the weather, but as I say, what could you expect? I can assure you I'm most grateful for your having me. Pity I've got to go. But there it is. Needs must, and all that."

Ness hesitated. Another buffet of wind struck the house, and a coal dropped out of the fire. She knelt to replace it with the tongs.

"I'm surprised you should still think it necessary to go," she said.

"I think we have been through all that," returned Olly a little stiffly.

"We haven't. We haven't touched the edge of the thing. We've all been hanging back, being polite and dignified and, in fact, stupid."

Ness had risen from the hearth. Her head rested for a moment on her left hand, the elbow propped against the mantelpiece; her dark eyes took the gleam of the fire, and

she spoke vehemently. Olly flicked cigar ash into the fireplace and sought to evade the edge of her intensity.

"Don't see it, I must say. Extremely good of you, of course, Miss Nimmo, to think about me, but I'm very glad to tell you that a cousin of mine in Edinburgh, a widow, can put me up, and I think we'll be able to manage quite nicely—in a modest way, of course."

"To be frank, Mr. Pomphrey, I'm not thinking about you alone. I'm not even thinking about that beastly money, which has already caused sufficient trouble among us, God knows! I'm thinking about myself."

She swung away from the fire to challenge his open look. He saw her as tall and imperious, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright.

"You probably don't know . . . In fact, I asked him not to tell you. . . . But Duggie is leaving me now. He wants to go away, out of the country, and I couldn't dream of trying to stop him. So it seems I'm going to be left alone, one useless woman in a big house."

"Oh, I say!"

The point of her complaint was not lost on Olly, for all the emptiness of his phrase. His heart was kind, and now it was touched by a close awareness of the loneliness that threatened to engulf them both and, in the nature of things, press more drearily on the woman than on himself.

"Duggie going away!" he repeated. "Has he said where?"

"Does that matter at all?"

"No, now you mention it, I don't suppose it does."

Ness laughed quietly and said: "Sorry, Mr. Pomphrey! Please try to forgive me if there's a rough edge on my tongue to-night. But it's the silliness. . . . Nearly twenty years of company and sharing and, I hope, respect. . . . Aren't you practically one of us, closer to Dug and me than even Quin could ever be? . . . And now, because of a few shillings each week, you feel you must go, and I must be left, an old hen with a fortune I never wanted—and poor little Thora. The silliness of it is beyond belief."

"But that, dear lady, is just how it has turned out. Too bad, of course, but . . ."

"But what?" she threw at him. "Prides and prejudices! Utter nonsense!"

Olly tossed the butt of his cigar into the fire. Ness relaxed from her tragic pose against the mantelpiece and circled the room, looking at the Christmas-flowering bulbs in their bowls and pausing at length before the lighted tree. Olly rose in his turn and leaned against the mantelpiece.

"It's all extremely awkward," he said reasonably. "There are two sides to every question. I don't even know that a fellow's pride is to be sneered at—not, dear lady," he added hastily, "that I would ever dream of accusing you of that. But the way you put it, I mean to say . . . It's all so dashed difficult. . . . But don't you raise one or two ticklish questions, even if they are only questions of appearances?"

"Yes. That's it."

Ness spoke easily, as one suddenly released from inhibitions. She smiled to the paying guest across the few feet of space between them, even if her heart was beating quickly through excitement and fear.

"This will sound crazy to you at first, but I mean it. Will you think of it very carefully, please? I wonder, Mr. Pomphrey, if you could think of marrying me?"

"Good God!"

They stood face to face in the extremes of awkwardness and surprise. The slight advantage was with Ness, who had rehearsed the situation. She swept on:

"I know it must sound ludicrous to you, but it's really not so. Really, it isn't . . . I'm asking nothing at all except the use of your name. We'd go on as we've been going all these years. We wouldn't be a couple of children in love. We'd remain friends. . . . Am I being an utter fool?"

Olly rolled a cigarette, but his fingers trembled. His voice quavered.

"You are not, nor could you ever be, a fool, Miss Nimmo. And I deeply appreciate your thought. Very deeply; I'll never forget. But I really couldn't dream of accepting so much kindness, on such a scale. A chap, any decent chap," said Olly, "has got to stand on his own feet or jolly well collapse. That's the size of it."

He sat down again in his chair, flicking the moustache. Ness turned from the table at the window and switched out the lights on the poor little Christmas tree. She leaned over the back of her own chair.

"I seem to be explaining myself very badly," she said. "I should have told you in the first place. You see . . . Oh, I still can't put it properly! . . . When Kit died, I lost pretty well all I had. A woman's fate is to care for the youngest about her. Any ordinary woman is like that. Any ordinary woman—the average decent woman—needs something to look after and care for. So——"

"And I am the thing to be looked after?" cried Olly bitterly.

"No, no! What an idea, Mr. Pomphrey! It's so utterly different. Let me explain."

She came from behind the chair, lit a cigarette with deliberation and sat down again, almost as for a chat.

"Some time ago I got the idea that I might adopt a baby, and of course I could do so even as a single woman. So I went to see the Vigilance people. . . . It was that day you met me off the train and told me about your own difficulties. . . . They told me a lot of things I didn't know before. The conditions are all very complicated, and naturally they ask all sorts of questions, but it comes to this. A single person can only adopt a child of his or her own sex."

"And very right, too," said Olly, interested.

"Then a single person, bringing up a child to believe that it has a mother or a father like any other child, may have some awkward moments when the child grows up and discovers that its father or mother so-called is a bachelor or a spinster. The effects on the child might be awful."

"By George, they might! Frightful situation. Would never have thought of it myself."

"In any case," Ness went on urgently, "the people who run these things prefer that the adopters should be a married couple, both parties willing to do their honest best for the infant. And don't I know that they're right!" she added wryly. "I had twenty years of it the other way round. A child needs, absolutely needs, the right balance of influences."

"I expect it does," observed Olly vaguely. "Most interesting."

Ness snapped her fingers and crushed the butt of her cigarette in an ash-tray.

"Lord, I suppose I must sound like a female Civil Servant lecturing an audience of poor women from the slums! But that's what I've wanted to say all these weeks. Oh, I know it may seem completely fantastic, and even an insult! I'd be heart-sorry if that were so, but at least it is between you and me entirely."

She jumped up again and pressed a coal back into the heart of the fire with an impulsive foot.

"I only did think, very sincerely and as sensibly as I could, that with so much respect between us, so much understanding of each other's ways—yes, and with so much affectionate friendship . . . I did think it wasn't utterly mad."

She returned to her seat, almost slumping into it, and Olly rose from his and started to roll another cigarette.

"It is not mad, by any means," he said at length. "I'd call it a very reasonable and gracious suggestion. And believe me, my dear friend, nobody could have a greater admiration for your sense and courage than I."

He suddenly stooped, lifted her hand, and with courtliness, and his own mysterious dignity, kissed her fingers. Ness blushed deeply.

"Thank you, Mr. Pomphrey," she said.

"I think we might at least use Christian names . . . Ness," he suggested with a smile.

"Thank you again, then, Olly," she laughed softly.

The paying guest puffed at his cigarette.

"Well, we know where we are now, don't we?" he suggested. He added earnestly: "But you'll appreciate that it's a bit of a poser for me?"

"I was never in any doubt about that, Olly."

"Fair enough, then. . . . I say, it *would* be rather jolly to have a kid about the place, feeding the hens and what-not! But it does want thinking about, doesn't it? I say, Ness, if you don't mind, I think I'll take a leaf out of Duggie's book and go and have a walk. Sure you'll be quite happy with the evening paper?"

The second Saturday of May, 1947, was fine and warm, the skies above the Firth scoured clear by a light nor'-westerly air.

A baby carriage of handsome proportions, even with something of the chaste, black dignity of a regal limousine, stood outside the gracious porch of the house across the water Agnessa Godenzi Nimmo had bought for herself. Tall and absorbed, she bent over the vehicle, shaking cushions, punching pillows and stroking covers with the care of a theatre sister preparing for a major operation.

From the house there emerged anon the sturdy figure of the orphan girl called Thora, clutching in her arms an infant in a sleeping-bag of llama wool. Ness took this bundle from the girl and laid it in the carriage with care. Thora moved round her mistress to take her part in the important business of tucking the covers under the mattress on which the infant in its warm sack was already quite securely placed. Ness raised the pram's copious hood.

"Isn't he just a wee duck?" asked Thora rhetorically.

"He's nice," Ness agreed, smiling.

"Can I have a shot at the pram to-morrow, missus? It's ma day off, but me and ma girl-friend . . ."

"Of course you will, silly. You always get him on Sundays, don't you? Now, run away in like a good girl and finish those dishes. You can get out early to-night for the pictures."

Ness hesitated and again bent over the infant, now drowsy and capable only of a wan smile behind a soft belch. Douglas Nimmo Pomphrey, the love-child of a German prisoner and an Ayrshire farm-lass, but securely registered under the name Olly had agreed to give her. He need never know, and the critical years of decision were far away in the future. She thought rather of the soundness of the stock from which he sprang, of his good temper, of the love and care and education she could give him.

She hardly heard a footstep behind her, and the light kiss on her cheek took her by surprise.

"Olly! Everybody will see us!" She blushed deeply.

"Let them, by all means. I mean to say, you looked so dashed handsome, bending over young Dug. Nice kid, eh?"

He extended a finger to chuck the child under the chin. The infant frowned and started in the unreasonable way of its kind to grizzle.

"Expect my hand's a bit too heavy," said Olly equably. "I wouldn't really trust myself awfully far with a very young kid, I must say. I'd like to think, just the same," Olly added brightly, "I'd like to think I'll be able some day to teach young Dug how to handle a boat. Nothing like handling a boat to test what's really in a young fellow or what's not. And that reminds me, Ness . . ."

She started to wheel the perambulator down the drive. She was always prepared for Olly's revelations.

"The fact is, the Chairman of the General Committee asked if he could have a special word with me this afternoon. My own guess—even if I say it myself—is that they're going to ask me to be Club Timekeeper. I did quite a lot of that when I was a youngster; studied the job rather carefully, in fact; very tricky work; and I suppose they've heard."

"That's grand, Olly!" she encouraged him; and then cried: "Oh, dear! Look what this brat has done!"

She braked the pram to attend to a disturbance that the baby, kicking lustily, had created among its wrappings.

"Well, I'll walk on, my dear girl, if you don't mind. See you about five for tea as usual, I hope."

Her eyes, over the hood of the carriage, followed the slim, alert figure as it passed down the drive and out through the big wooden gates.

Her husband. Sometimes the silly, fussy, old-maidish caricature of a citizen who, having been admitted to the Royal Caledonian Yacht Club, so pathetically pretended now that his former allegiance to the legendary Royal Firth was an aberration. A phantom of a man: inactive, unqualified, unproductive, like an armadillo within his frail plating of prejudices and stock phrases, but still something perdurable in a harsh world—Peter Oliphant Pomphrey, gentleman.

Ness thought sometimes that she positively loved him for his gift of kindness. It was certain that without him she could

not have endured as a reasonable human being. Having survived nearly forty years of living, she was as content as any woman could be with life's small mercies ; and she sang to the baby as, quite briskly, she wheeled the pram downhill to the Front.

THE END

